

“Everything
became a matter
of life and death.
New political
ideas were
receiving serious
consideration.”

—From “Lurking” by Alexandria Neason

Simon van Zuylen-Wood on when the pundits paused

Stephania Taladrid on guiding Latinos through this campaign season

Jack Herrera on how “Defund the Police” became election news

Lyz Lenz on how Iowans view parachute reporters

Akintunde Ahmad on which stories matter

Adam Piore on why MSNBC is so hard to watch

Jon Allsop on listening to experts

Madeleine Schwartz on elections around the world

Sam Wang on polling trauma

Nicholson Baker on scary-politics YouTube—and how to escape it

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The Election Issue

Reckoning

Covering an election amid a pandemic and an uprising

Akintunde Ahmad • Nicholson Baker • Jack Herrera • Lyz Lenz • Adam Piore
Mychal Denzel Smith • Stephania Taladrid • Sam Wang • Simon van Zuylen-Wood





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CONTACT

Columbia Journalism Review, 801 Pulitzer Hall, 2950 Broadway
Columbia University, New York, NY 10027

Editorial 212-854-1881 or email cjr@columbia.edu

Advertising 917-597-9865

Business 212-854-2718

MEMBERSHIPS

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Contributors

Akintunde Ahmad, a recent CJR fellow, is now an Ida B. Wells Fellow with Type Investigations. He is based in Oakland.

Jon Allsop is a freelance journalist. He writes CJR's newsletter The Media Today.

Nicholson Baker is the author of many books, including his most recent, *Baseless: My Search for Secrets in the Ruins of the Freedom of Information Act*.

Amanda Darrach is a contributor to CJR and a visiting scholar at the University of St Andrews School of International Relations.

Jack Herrera is an independent reporter covering immigration, refugees, Latinx issues, and human rights. His work has appeared in *Politico Magazine*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere. Based in San Francisco, he is an Ida B. Wells Fellow with Type Investigations.

Lyz Lenz is a writer based in Iowa. Her work has appeared in *Pacific Standard*, *Marie Claire*, *Jezebel*, and the *Washington Post*.

Alexandria Neason is CJR's staff writer and senior Delacorte Fellow. Previously, she was a reporter at the *Village Voice* and covered education for the Teacher Project, a partnership between the Columbia Journalism School and *Slate*.

Adam Piore is a freelance magazine journalist and the author of *The Accidental Terrorist* and *The Body Builders: Inside the Science of the Engineered Human*.

Madeleine Schwartz is a writer and editor. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, the *New York Review of Books*, and elsewhere. She is the creator and editor of *The Ballot*.

Mychal Denzel Smith is the author of *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching*. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Harper's*, and more.

Stephania Taladrid is a member of the editorial staff at *The New Yorker*. Before that, she served as a speechwriter for the Obama administration.

Sam Wang is a professor of neuroscience at Princeton University and the director of the Princeton Election Consortium.

Simon van Zuylen-Wood is a freelance writer based in New York City. He has written for *New York*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *Politico Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and other publications.

Table of Contents

6 Editor's Note

By Kyle Pope

Field Notes

10 Unmasking Certainty

By Jon Allsop

14 Our Polling Trauma

By Sam Wang

17 Stories Worth Sharing

By Akintunde Ahmad

20 Elections Everywhere

By Madeleine Schwartz

DATA

32 Publishing Power

86 Layoff Season

PHOTOGRAPHY

66 Outside In

120 End Note

COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Seven journalists on how this election season is unlike any other.

31 Zach Montellaro

57 Sabrina Siddiqui

64 Jonathan Oosting

84 Allen Devlin

99 Edward-Isaac Dovere

103 Brianne Pfannenstiel

108 Dave Weigel



ON THE COVER

In June, Olivier Douliery took photographs for AFP/Getty Images at a demonstration against police brutality in Washington, DC.

Features

22

When the Pundits Paused

"Life has punctured the bubble of political bullshit in Washington."

By Simon van Zuylen-Wood

34

Defund the Police

Police abolition has entered the 2020 campaign. Reporters have some homework to do.

By Jack Herrera

42

"This Is a Moment for Imagination"

A conversation about the limits and opportunities of seeking police abolition in an election year

Mychal Denzel Smith, Josie Duffy Rice, and Alex Vitale

48

YouTube's Psychic Wounds

To the wrong clip and back again

By Nicholson Baker

58

The Essentials

How Univision has guided Latinos through a historic election cycle

By Stephania Taladrid

76

The Lurker

How Joanne McNeil copes with the inundation of news online

By Alexandria Neason

88

Tuned Out

Identity crisis at MSNBC

By Adam Piore

104

Staring Contest

How election reporters see Iowans, and how Iowans view them

By Lyz Lenz

112

Chaos Theory

Talking to a political scientist about how nihilism affects the media landscape

By Amanda Darrach

EDITOR'S NOTE

A Time of Opportunity

Good riddance to the political coverage that was.

AUTHOR

Kyle Pope

IN THE SUMMER OF 2015, as Donald Trump began his campaign for the presidency, a bacterium was spreading in New York City. Twelve people had become sick earlier in the year; by August, the outbreak had reached more than a hundred and twenty. A dozen in the South Bronx died. The cause was Legionnaires' disease, an airborne illness that can result in severe pneumonia, especially among the elderly and others with compromised immune systems.

It was a scary public health emergency that highlighted how difficult it is for officials to identify and trace the spread of disease, even on a relatively contained scale. New cases continued to surface, but the media's attention soon moved on: Trump was finding his footing as a candidate-provocateur. He went on a live tirade against Megyn Kelly, saying that she had "blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever." Then he released his first policy proposal, calling for an unprecedented crackdown on immigrants.

There was, all the while, another story that could have become a focal point for American journalism: in the year after Trump announced his candidacy for president, twelve hundred people were killed at the hands of police. The victims were two and a half times more likely to be Black than white. Not counted in that number were those who died in the summer leading up to the 2016 election—people like Alton Sterling,



a Black man shot and killed by white officers in Baton Rouge, and Philando Castile, a Black man pulled over by white cops in Saint Paul, then shot to death while he was reaching for his license. Protests filled the streets while Trump whistled along the campaign trail.

During this period, the press obsessed over Trump. And when he became president, the focus remained on him. Everything has been viewed through a Trump lens: Poverty. The Middle East. Climate change. Race. He is no doubt complicit in making long-standing problems worse, but it's dishonest to present him as the sole, dominant actor. Making him so is more about easy story lines and a simple villain than it is about good journalism. It's a lot easier to riff for ten minutes about Trump the climate denier, for instance, than it is to understand decades of newsroom failure and corporate influence in the climate crisis. What's lost are the undercurrents of how we ended up where we are.

Immediately after Trump was elected, journalism entered a whirl of self-reflection: How had we failed to take Trump and his electorate seriously? How had we so badly misread the country? Newsrooms examined their coverage, their coastal biases, their overreliance on polling. One outlet rented a bus to drive around the country and listen to people. The stakes went beyond PR; more than a third of America felt a deep mistrust of the press—some rejected it entirely. That

created an opening for Trump and his followers to fill our screens with misinformation and manipulation, helped by outlets like Fox News and One America News Network, which present themselves as antidotes to “fake news.” Somehow, between the fall of 2016 and the spring of 2020, we lost the thread on self-improvement.

Now we're in the teeth of a pandemic that has killed more than a hundred thousand Americans and a reckoning with our racist history that has sent even more into action. It is a pivotal moment for the country and for journalism. Good riddance to the political coverage that was. We have the chance to set aside superficial trivia and focus on systemic and institutional failures. We can tune Trump out. We can discard the caricatures we have in our minds about the people who support the president and his party. This is an opportunity, unprecedented in the middle of a contested campaign, to reset how we work.

The coronavirus pandemic laid bare the deficiencies of America's public health system, the most expensive on earth. The deep inequities in infection and survival, depending on your address and your income and your race. The two-tiered workforce, where clocking in from home to avoid the virus was not an available option for two-thirds of the country. The lack of any kind of economic safety net or family-support structure. The deep regional and educational differences at play in how we listened to experts and heeded their advice. When Derek Chauvin, a white police officer in Minneapolis, killed George Floyd, a Black man, outside a grocery store, we were reminded again about the crisis of police brutality and its connection to the racism found in every corner of the country, from our businesses to our sports teams, our pop culture to our newsrooms.

All of these stories have been chronicled by reporters in the past six months. But let's be honest about our faults: as important as the stories have been, every single one of those dynamics was in place and in force before the pandemic, and should have been taken more seriously. Part of the problem is embedded in who we are: journalists in America don't remotely represent the country we cover. Less than 17 percent of staffers at print and online publications are people of color, even though minority groups constitute almost 40 percent of the United States. How can journalism adequately tell stories from which it is so far removed? For many Black journalists, the uprising that has followed Floyd's death is hardly a surprise; the only mystery is why so many white Americans, and the news outlets that employ them, decided this time was different.

Good journalism is supposed to expose shortcomings, to shine a light on that which is wrong—before a pandemic or the murder of another Black person by white pursuers does it for us. Our job now is to put in the effort. Ahead of Election Day, let's write and report not just on what the candidates are saying, but on what they should be talking about. Let's serve up the institutional outrages and the systemic breakdowns that will demand the winner's attention. Let's point to who and what is blocking progress and let's take

seriously the people offering serious ideas about reform. And then, after November, let's continue steering attention where it belongs.

This issue of CJR is about coverage of an election when the rituals of campaign reporting disappear. Simon van Zuylen-Wood examines the insta-quote that is David Axelrod, the king of the pundits, who offers amazing insights like "Conventional wisdom is a perilous thing." Pundits (who, especially when cited in print, tend to be white and male) are a sign of journalistic laziness, van Zuylen-Wood writes, as mainstream news outlets turn to the same sources again and again. But this election cycle, because of the pandemic, Axelrod was benched for a while; we meet him sheltering in place and carrying on as best he knows how.

Stephania Taladrid chronicles the way Univision News—which serves Spanish-speaking Americans in a way that other outlets cannot—responded to the shock of the coronavirus. We hear from Lourdes Torres, the senior vice president of political coverage,

Let's report not just on what the candidates are saying, but on what they should be talking about.

as she tries to strike a balance between helping Latino viewers survive the day-to-day and keeping their electoral interests in focus.

Jack Herrera shows how “Defund the Police”—a long-standing, meticulously thought-out proposal to abolish the prison-industrial complex—got suddenly co-opted as an election story. Josie Duffy Rice, Mychal Denzel Smith, and Alex Vitale discuss how the anti-racism protests are being covered in the context of the election season. Lyz Lenz looks back at the predictable, one-dimensional coverage of the caucuses in Iowa, where she lives, and warns of the dangers of parachute journalism where many local reporters have lost their jobs. Akintunde Ahmad writes about why mainstream news is particularly distrusted among young Black voters in his hometown of Oakland.

Adam Piore reviews MSNBC as a case study in how cable news lost the battle to personality. Nicholson Baker goes down the wormhole of YouTube, where more and more Americans are getting their political information. Alexandria Neason profiles Joanne McNeil, the author of a new book, *Lurking*:

How a Person Became a User, who offers strategies to escape the harms of the doomscroll.

One of the challenges of covering this season in American politics is that we are doing it while our journalistic resources are hobbled. By collecting data from across the country, in collaboration with our colleagues at Columbia’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism, we have been tracking the job losses and putting them in context. Some swing states have been hard hit. Can national outlets make up for the decimation of local news? In the days ahead, we’ll continue to seek answers beyond our print pages, as part of an effort called the Journalism Crisis Project, focused on tallying and mapping the jobs lost, outlets closed, salaries cut, and people furloughed since the beginning of the pandemic and the economic slide that has followed.

That all of these threads are now coming together—a presidential election, a local-news void, a pandemic, and a reckoning with our national shame of racism—represents a major test of our profession. We have an opportunity to make long-overdue changes that live up to the moment. **CJR**

Field Notes

FROM THE CAMPAIGNS

ALLEGIANCES

Unmasking Certainty

By Jon Allsop

ILLUSTRATOR

Claire Merchlinsky

IN EARLY MARCH I was wondering, as many people were, if I should get a face mask. I remember standing in my kitchen watching cable news when a medical expert declared that there was little evidence a mask could prevent our catching COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. People should not wear one, the expert said, unless they were medical workers, were displaying COVID-like symptoms, or were caring for someone who was sick. I relayed that advice to friends and family and repeated some variant of it in *The Media Today*, the daily newsletter I write for the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

What I'd heard on cable news was typical of the time. As the coronavirus crisis intensified, many health authorities—including the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—offered similar advice. If members of the public rushed to buy hospital-grade masks, we were told, the supply for essential workers, who needed them, would be scarce. Some experts even argued that because the average person wasn't trained to wear one properly, a mask could heighten the risk of exposure to COVID-19 by inducing a false sense of security.

News organizations repeated these claims. In late February, *Forbes* ran a piece with the headline “No, You DO NOT Need Face Masks For Coronavirus—They Might Increase Your Infection Risk.” The story has since been viewed more than 4.5 million times; it was also updated (including the headline) to



reflect changing mask guidance. Jerome Adams, the surgeon general, tweeted to implore Americans to “STOP BUYING MASKS,” which drove a further round of coverage. On March 2, Adams appeared on *Fox & Friends* to hammer home the point; masks, he said, had “not been proven to be effective in preventing the spread of coronavirus amongst the general public.”

Then, in early April, officials reversed themselves: everyone, the CDC said, should have face coverings and wear them in enclosed spaces. Health officials explained that compelling new evidence had come to light regarding asymptomatic transmission of the virus, and that wider usage of masks could prevent unknowing carriers from spreading infection. Alex Azar, the secretary of health and human services, said the new guidance was the fruit of a “science-based approach.” On April 3, Adams appeared in a video in which he showed viewers how to fashion a mask from an old T-shirt. Fact-based media outlets, striving to follow the latest findings, scrambled to keep up as infectious-disease debates, normally consigned to journals and conferences, played out in public in real time.

The usual shortcuts to writing authoritative-sounding articles were not available on this story. People picked up on that, filling the air of uncertainty with political conviction. Conservatives adopted masks as symbols of fearmongering government overreach; liberals counter-adopted them as icons of Enlightenment values. Political reporters lapped it up, mindful that the pandemic had arrived in an election year. President Trump played the lightning rod; he declined repeatedly to wear a mask, even after the White House made them mandatory in the West Wing. (In May, Trump briefly wore one during a visit to a Ford factory in Michigan, but took it off before addressing reporters. “I didn’t want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it,” he said.) On Fox News, Laura Ingraham suggested that masks were tools of “fear and intimidation,” designed to assert “social control over large populations.” Elsewhere, masks were described as a new “tribal totem” in the all-encompassing culture war. In late May, after a white police officer killed George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis, and protests convulsed the country, some right-wing commentators accused the mainstream media of a

Masks were described as a new “tribal totem.”

double standard, since journalists didn't chastise demonstrators who violated mask rules. (Reporters covering the protests typically wore masks, of both the medical and anti-tear-gas varieties.)

There's conflicting evidence as to whether the mask culture war actually took hold. Some polling showed persistent differences between how Democrats and Republicans—and consumers of different news outlets—perceived aspects of the pandemic, including the threat it initially presented, the death toll, and masks. Other polls indicated that support for public health measures—including masks—was high across the board. What's not in dispute is that a narrative of a mask culture war swept America's media, nourished by egregious examples of anti-mask conduct, including lockdown protesters bearing anti-mask signs; Trump supporters harassing mask-clad journalists; and even the murder, at a store in Flint, Michigan, of a security guard who turned away an unmasked patron. Readers were told about Republicans in Congress failing to wear masks, unlike their Democratic colleagues. In May, Sen. Susan Collins, the famously flip-flopping Republican from Maine, began a congressional hearing without a mask, then put one on. James Poniewozik, TV critic at the *New York Times*, skewered her for “trying to keep one lung in each camp.”

A hallmark of the recent wave of right-wing populism around the globe has been the denigration of expertise. Experts are cast as sneering, liberal elites who are out of touch with, and also hate, common folk. Whenever an expert changes his mind, doing so underscores his fallibility. Adjusting one's position upon learning of new evidence is not admired, but rather scorned as a sign of weakness.

The pandemic has rallied consumers of right-wing media against expertise, with mask-wearing a key target. In early April, as the mask advice shifted, Fox's Ingraham called it an example of “experts” (scare quotes hers) all but admitting to their “spectacular record of failure.” (Ironically, Ingraham previously advocated the wearing of masks. After the expert advice changed, so did her position—in the opposite direction.) Rush Limbaugh, the talk radio host, likewise bashed experts; in March, he said that unelected public health officials were part of the “Deep State.” In April, Tucker Carlson warned Fox viewers that “the experts now have more power than ever before”; he insisted he wasn't making “an

Expertise, many news organizations felt, was to be defended against bad-faith attacks.

argument against expertise,” then said, “We can't allow experts to make the big decisions. That's not their job. This is a democracy. It is our job.”

Distrust of centralized authority is a foundational theme in the history of the United States, going back to its Constitution. In 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman, arrived to scope the country out, he observed that people seemed wary of experts: “The intellectual superiority which any man whatsoever may acquire in relation to the rest of the community is soon overshadowed,” he writes in *Democracy in America*. People in democracies “are naturally strongly persuaded of the certainty of their opinions, or are unwavering in belief; they frequently entertain doubts which no one, in their eyes, can remove.” As the years went by, others noticed the same thing. Anti-intellectualism was a key tenet of McCarthyism, and hardened amid the political and cultural battles of the sixties and seventies. “The citizen cannot cease to need or to be at the mercy of experts,” Richard Hofstadter, a historian at Columbia, wrote in 1963. “But he can achieve a kind of revenge by ridiculing the wild-eyed professor, the irresponsible brain truster, or the mad scientist.” Lately, anti-expert rage has appeared in the Tea Party and the rejection of climate science and the anti-vaccination movement; it helped elevate Trump, and vice versa. Tom Nichols, a professor at the US Naval War College and the author of *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (2017), writes that, thanks in part to the balkanization of American media, “A significant number of lay people now believe, for no reason but self-affirmation, that they know better than experts in almost every field.”

The mainstream press, too, positions itself as possessing unique knowledge and authority—often in tone, if not explicitly. But our authority only means something if we maintain a healthy skepticism of the people and institutions in power, by demanding corroboration for their claims, rather than accepting their edicts at face value. In the pandemic era, that essential function of journalism became fraught: because this is a novel threat, the evidence we'd normally demand isn't available—or is hotly disputed by institutions that appear to be (or actually are) equally credible.

And so, with masks, much of the coverage parroted whatever the official guidance was at the time, with scant scrutiny. Expertise, many news organizations felt, was to be defended

against bad-faith attacks. (See: Fauci, Dr. Anthony.) Though many good articles acknowledged that science is a process, not a ready-made consensus, plenty of others fixated on batting down whatever the right-wing position was—and, in doing so, accepted the premise that there are two “sides” in competition for truth.

American election stories are commonly about the conflict between sides—Democrat versus Republican, mask-wearer versus barefaced resister. The Trump era has supercharged that dynamic. The resumption of full-bore campaign coverage will impose an even tighter partisan framing on the pandemic; Trump has already started politicizing science in the hopes of gaining an electoral edge. There’s no reason, however, for reporters to accept that story line.

The press has got to slow down. Reporters need to accept ambiguity and uncertainty. Rather than rush toward facile answers or simplistic assertions, our stories must reveal the profound complexity of the problems at hand. We must be humble.

That may feel counterintuitive, given the immediacy of the pandemic, its centrality in all our lives, and our need to know much more about it before we can get back to normal. It’s the press’s job, in part, to bring a responsible sense of urgency to our collective quest for greater knowledge—including when and whether masks should be worn. But that work cannot be done responsibly if we don’t take the time to ask essential questions and open every possible window into understanding. Our coverage of vital public health information will not be truthful unless it’s patient. As Ed Yong, the *Atlantic* science writer (and master of authorial humility), put it in April, science is “less the parade of decisive blockbuster discoveries that the press often portrays, and more a slow, erratic stumble toward ever less uncertainty.” The more we can convey that reality to readers, the more we will have earned their trust.

The same thinking should apply to coverage of the campaign. Political reporters and pundits ought to acknowledge that we don’t know what the result will be ahead of time, rather than foreclose certain outcomes based on hunches, anecdotes, and biases. Discard sound bites and embrace the messiness of things. Submit candidates’ policy proposals to rigorous, evidence-driven interrogation, as if their plans held our lives in the balance. After all, they do. **CJR**



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FORECASTING

Our Polling Trauma

By Sam Wang

THE BRAIN LEARNS IN different ways. Mastering French verbs requires repetition. A single distressing experience, however, can impart a lasting lesson in moments; a car crash survivor, for instance, might come away with a deep fear of riding in cars. A lesson like that is hard to unlearn, even if its basis is irrational. For anyone who analyzes political polls—including me, a neuroscientist hooked on election forecasting—the 2016 presidential race may have constituted a similarly traumatic event, one that left the mind reeling.

Before that November, many political reporters, accustomed to conventional presidential candidates, found the idea of a Donald J. Trump victory unthinkable, even though the data pointed in a different direction. National opinion polls suggested that Hillary Clinton was favored to win by an average of three percentage points; in models that took into account the Electoral College, her advantage looked even smaller, about two percentage points. Rationally, the race should have been presented in news coverage as a close battle. And that's what came to pass on Election Day, when Trump's win was one of the narrowest on record. Yet the outcome felt like a shock.

I was among those who made a miscalculation. I used to joke on the Princeton Election Consortium, my election analytics website, when I was highly certain about races: I'd eat a bug if the results were to turn out contrary to my expectation. I tried to calibrate my assertions so that I would lose the bet no more than once in a lifetime. In 2016, I met my quota. I'd overestimated the precision of my model, making a final prediction of a Clinton win with 93 percent probability. Those who later saw me consume a cricket on CNN witnessed the bet's payoff.

I could have avoided that embarrassing experience had I not converted polling margins into win probabilities. In my prediction, I should have emphasized that a two-percentage-point difference in public opinion between the polls and the outcome might be enough to give the election to Trump. That distinction is important because journalists and readers tend to err toward excessive certainty. If you say, for instance, that Joe Biden has a 70 percent chance of winning this November, a reader might hear that he has a 100 percent chance. Indeed, Nate Silver's model in 2016 was appropriately uncertain, assigning Clinton a 71 percent chance of becoming president—and allowing about a 29 percent chance of the



Elections are hard to predict and can be intensely emotional.

opposite happening—but Silver was criticized for being “wrong.”

Consider a different context: if you’re offered a chance to play Russian roulette and the gun is one-third loaded—a 33 percent probability of a disastrous outcome—don’t play. Or take COVID-19: no science-savvy journalist would report that the outbreak is on the decline based on a probability from a mathematical model. With stakes that high, one would describe the trajectory of the pandemic based on direct measures, such as the trend in the number of deaths per day. Verifiable numbers tell readers whether conditions are getting better or worse without making predictions about the future.

After the upset of 2016, many political journalists might be tempted to fear polling data. Paying attention to opinion surveys, these reporters worry, could lead the public astray. But psychological research shows that a disturbing memory, born of trauma, can focus on the wrong triggering event. If we become afraid of polls, I think we are learning a false lesson. It isn’t that polls were inaccurate during the last presidential election—viewed in terms of percentage-point margins, they weren’t far off. The problem is that our brains

may have turned an emotional experience with polling into a lasting trauma.

During the Gilded Age, the United States witnessed massive disruption—there were technological innovations such as railroads, a shift from an agrarian to an industrial society, and deep social divisions over the rights of formerly enslaved Black people. It was commonly believed that the end of the world was near. These conditions feel familiar in America today, as questions of race and immigration loom large; the economy has again been remade by technology; and climate change, nuclear weapons, and the coronavirus pandemic make Armageddon seem imminent. The Gilded Age, too, was characterized by polarizing political conflict. And, like the modern examples of George W. Bush and Trump, two popular-vote losers won the Electoral College and became president: Rutherford B. Hayes and Benjamin Harrison.

In such close circumstances, elections are intrinsically hard to predict. At the same time, politics can take on an intensely emotional tone. Based on recent data, it would seem there is a correlation between strong political feeling and stability in public opinion. For example, since

There's no need for political reporters to be skittish; the polls of the past few years have largely been accurate.

Trump's election, the level of public approval (and disapproval) of the president has remained as firm as it's been since Gallup started tracking those numbers, in the forties. According to the *FiveThirtyEight* average, which combines data from different pollsters, Trump's approval rating has stayed within the range of about 37 to 43 percent for almost his entire presidency. Trump is the very model of stability—as the least popular incumbent in the history of polling.

Trump's job approval numbers stayed within that same narrow range even as the coronavirus spread across the United States. Contrast his performance with the ratings of governors and other world leaders, many of whom saw large jumps in popularity as the pandemic unfolded. Also recall Jimmy Carter's initial ratings leap during the Iranian hostage crisis, and Bush after 9/11, when his approval shot from 55 percent to 90, the highest any president has ever had. Compare Bush's thirty-five-point spike with Trump's "coronavirus bounce," a mere two percentage points lasting just a few weeks and ending with a net decline. We can interpret this as voter entrenchment: people either find Trump a threat to the republic or think that he's made America great again. Under fiercely emotional conditions, we don't take time for introspection or the slow evaluation of evidence. Instead, we rely on the resources that we have most readily available: our prior beliefs and prejudices. Almost nothing can change our minds.

That stability helps Trump stay afloat as a contender for reelection. In campaign after campaign, incumbent presidents have won a share of the vote close to their approval rating. Based on geographic patterns from 2016, Trump needs only about 48 percent of the two-party vote (that is, the total of Republican and Democratic votes) to have a shot at winning the Electoral College. At the upper end of his range of approval, thanks to his committed base, Trump would be within a few points of that threshold.

Of course, as the election approaches, a better indicator than presidential approval rating will be direct polling of the Biden-versus-Trump race. In an analysis of election-year presidential polls going back more than sixty years, I have found that the total range over which support for candidates moved up and down from May to November—the variability—used to be much greater than it is now. Shortly after Newt Gingrich's takeover of Congress, in 1994, and the founding of Fox News, in 1996, opinion became more locked

in—fluctuating half as much as it did before, or even less. At this point, many Trump supporters and opponents believe, perhaps because of how fixed voters are in their positions, that he's a lock for reelection.

That belief is false. It can be overcome by focusing not on national surveys or models, but on polls in individual states. Journalists covering the 2020 elections would be wise to remind readers that state-level polling averages usually land within a few points of final outcomes. If you're inclined to go deeper, the National Council on Public Polls offers a handy journalist cheat sheet. (But don't get into fine-grain technical questions like sampling. It's best not to second-guess the methods of a particular pollster—that runs the risk of motivated reasoning, which in the cognitive-science world means you're seeking a certain answer based on your bias.) You can also seek out confirmation for findings by viewing multiple polls.

Covering state and local elections can not only help us overcome a fear of polling. It can also foster interest in a subject that news consumers can actually do something about: down-ballot races, where citizen engagement is often weak. Along with gerrymandering and electoral reform, that's my main focus now: tracking where political races are tightest. It helps my readers learn where their efforts will make the most difference, because close elections can be turned by activism.

In 2018 and 2019, polls were pretty good at identifying close campaigns. In 2018, for instance, Democratic congressional candidates led Republicans in national surveys by a median of 8.5 points. That year, Democrats retook control of the House with a popular-vote margin of 8.6 points. In 2019, polls showed that, in Louisiana and Kentucky, the top candidates for governor were within a few percentage points of each other. Democrats took both races, each by less than three points; in both states, campaigns and get-out-the-vote work proved pivotal.

There's no need for political reporters to be skittish; the polls of the past few years have largely been accurate. By continuing to present the data, journalists can walk back the trauma of 2016—and reveal important truths about the American electorate. Predictions can be off, to be sure; the key is to keep coverage simple, put facts in context, and not overreach. It takes many experiences, but fear can be unlearned. **CJR**

COMMUNITY

Stories Worth Sharing

By Akintunde Ahmad



DRIVING ACROSS THE BAY Bridge from the San Francisco airport to my childhood home, in East Oakland, I can see cranes moving cargo containers. I get on the 580 freeway, which divides the city. To the west are the Oakland Hills, where the wealthy live; to the east are the flats, home to the working classes. I'm from the flats, where I grew up among other low-to-middle-income African-American families. Passing through the divide, I scope out new buildings that have sprung up since my last visit, mostly luxury apartments. In the distance, among the residential high-rises and office skyscrapers downtown, a familiar landmark stands out: the Tribune Tower.

Until it shuttered, in 2016, the *Oakland Tribune* was my hometown paper. I remember hearing the delivery van roll by; someone would toss our copy, wrapped in a plastic bag, up the driveway in the wee hours of the morning. One story from my childhood stands out. It was about the Oakland Riders, four police officers who terrorized Oakland residents for years, resulting, in 2003, in a case settlement of \$10.9 million. I was seven years old when that news broke, and already fully aware of how police officers would come into neighborhoods like mine, taking what they wanted, harming whom they wanted. As of 2016, according to an article in the *East Bay Times*, one of those cops was still a police officer, in Southern California, while two of the others worked for security companies.

I never read the paper much, unless I was browsing the classifieds section, seeking puppies for sale. But my father could often be found on the living room couch with the *Tribune* spread across his lap. If there was something he thought was interesting, like the Riders story, he'd give the family a synopsis. My engagement with the news ended there. I was a math and science kid with no interest in current events.

During my senior year of high school, however, I was thrust into the media spotlight for "making it out" of Oakland—a community associated with violence and tragedy—and committing to attend Yale. I was paraded around national news broadcasts that cheered my success. At the time, my brother was incarcerated; in the stories, my picture was often held up in comparison to his. I felt torn. I was happy to be representing my city in a positive light, but I couldn't help but question what society expected of people like me if graduating from a public high school and attending an elite college was considered newsworthy.

While at Yale, I studied African-American history. I majored in sociology. I wanted to learn about how and why society functions as it does, to understand the ways race and class determined my position and my brother's. Seeking answers to those questions, I wound up right back home, interning at the law offices of John Burris, the attorney who represented the plaintiffs in the Oakland Riders case from my childhood. It was in his office that I found my way to journalism.

My job was to intake potential cases by listening to story after story of police misconduct from residents on the receiving end. We may have gotten ten or twenty calls a day. We repeatedly heard the same names of cops brutalizing members of our community without fear of being held accountable. Only a fraction of the complaints ever made it to a courtroom. Without significant evidence, such as video footage, it would be difficult to win in court; most cases were dropped early. But it was hard for me to let go of them, of the stories of my neighbors, so worthy of being told. These people were, I came to realize, the human beings on whom the news weighs. All the articles about housing policy and immigration policy and policing policy reflected their experience. Political coverage was personal to them.

So I read, I watched, I listened. I became a news junkie, following political stories large and small. I became absorbed in the news that

tracked the rise of Donald Trump, and had my mind blown by what he got away with. It all felt like need-to-know information. Ultimately, I decided to pursue a career in reporting, which meant that, a lot of the time, my attention drifted from what I'd come for—the truth about my community, and who holds power over it—to the horse race election stuff. And the deeper I went, the more I noticed something strange. Gradually, I felt space growing between me and my peers, most of whom barely even read the stories that now engulfed my life.

While back home recently, I had a chance to ask my friends about how they consume news, on the election and otherwise. Pretty much all of them had the same three answers: Apple News push alerts, Twitter trending stories, and Instagram. "I literally just get the news updates on my phone," my friend Juwan Anderson told me. "It just pops up every day, so I don't have a choice but to know about it. I don't necessarily read them, but I can see the summary and understand it."

Unlike me, most people have other things to do besides reading multiple election predictions and analyses per day, on top of the latest updates about a global pandemic. And, as if staying up to date on COVID-19 weren't enough, the recent wave of protests highlighting police brutality and racism in our society has snatched up the media spotlight, adding yet another urgent story to the daily news cycle—drawing attention even further away from the presidential race. For someone who is from a liberal city, as Oakland is, I can understand why election news may seem particularly unimportant to my peers, especially now: We all know the folks in our area are voting for the Democrat, whoever that is, every time. Once the primaries are over, there doesn't seem to be much exciting campaign news that matters. We have other concerns to focus on.

But there's another factor, too. When I asked my friend Jordan Reed about political news, he said, "There aren't too many sources that I trust because of how misleading politics can be." He went on: "Once I learned about how people can use the news to game the economy and business world, I really stopped trusting it. I'd prefer to just learn from Twitter—watching a raw, uncut version of people's thoughts unfold."

Social media accounts like Baller Alert and the Shade Room keep my friends up to date on

Had I lost
sight of why
I became a
journalist in
the first place?

news about our favorite entertainers and athletes; politics will stream in when something major happens. It all feels more personal, and therefore more honest, than a newspaper, to them. The points of emphasis align with their interests. Anderson will go to the news section of Twitter and scroll through the headlines and summaries. “If it’s trending, I’ll know about it,” he said.

Stanley Wright-Arnold deleted his Twitter account; he prefers Instagram. “I mostly get news on the election and politics from credible Instagram pages like CNN or Bay Area news outlets, and also prominent politically active personal pages,” he told me. But exposure to national politics can often seem to be a bad thing. “Sometimes, we may see more blunt racism or different groups being stereotyped because of Trump’s behavior, or racist people just stirring up conflict across our communities,” he said. What does reading election predictions or Trump takedowns do for young people in Oakland? “Absolutely nothing,” Wright-Arnold replied. “We already know Trump’s viewpoints and how he uses his power. We’re voting against him—what more can we do?”

He had a point. I wondered, as I talked to my friends, if I had become so wrapped up in the conventions and priorities of the election news cycle that I’d distanced myself from my home, my community. That I’d lost sight of why I became a journalist in the first place.

I studied sociology because I wanted to make connections, to understand how people like me fit into the American political system and how our fates are formed by it. I became a reporter because I wanted to share what I learned. But after not very long into my career, I realize, I’ve acquired some habits that I don’t like, some views that don’t square with my own ideals. Political coverage can’t be so self-absorbed that it forgets whom it’s really for.

At times I’ve been frustrated by my friends’ avoidance of the news. But I have to check myself; I can’t blame them for not following along the same way I do. The whole point of reporting is to serve them, and to make it obvious why our stories are relevant. Election coverage ought to show, for instance, how embracing the Black Lives Matter movement involves more than not voting for Trump. If we struggle to do that—if the latest election update feels too abstract to matter to my friends—maybe it’s not worth their time anyway. **CJR**



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WORLDWIDE

Elections Everywhere

By Madeleine Schwartz

IT'S EASY FOR AMERICANS to feel that we are separate and distinct from the rest of the world. Much of what we read tells us so. Nowhere was that clearer than in coverage of the Democratic primary as, for months, the news was filled with horse race reporting on the front-runners' sexuality, their eating habits, their spouses, and their fashion choices. "Here's the story behind Tom Steyer's plaid tie," CNN offered. "Who is Tom Steyer without his red plaid tie?" Vox countered. Marianne Williamson ran a long advertisement for herself in the guise of a political campaign; she was rewarded with interviews and profiles in major publications. I don't know how many articles I read about Pete Buttigieg's ability to speak Norwegian, but it was certainly more than I found about the seismic changes overtaking politics in Europe.

Election coverage was premised on the view that whoever got the Democratic nomination would single-handedly alter the course of the universe. Meanwhile, the United States almost entered a war with Iran, a far-right populist movement was spreading across many of our nation's allies, and the new coronavirus was beginning to infect people around the world. In its narrow focus on the primary—that is, on itself—the American press largely failed to convey that a deadly threat was making its way over from Wuhan, China, a city whose population is more than fifteen times the size of Washington, DC's. If we had been paying attention, we would have had more time to learn from the examples of Italy and South Korea and elsewhere. But that would have required us to recognize that

Americans might be in the same position as people beyond our borders, that our fates are shared.

Journalists will likely point to the economic pressures that drive decisions about how and where to focus coverage. When there are cutbacks, foreign bureaus are often the first to go; increasingly, the work of foreign correspondents is left to freelancers. But it's not just a money problem. The paradigm of the American media puts American politics at the center, out of a belief that American politics steer the world. In 2020, however, that's no longer true, if it ever was. The US does not set the agenda for world policy. Moreover, no matter who our president is, our future as Americans depends nearly as much on who wins elections in other countries. That's the reality of a world that is truly interconnected.

In February, I launched a website called *The Ballot* to track every major 2020 election outside the United States. At the time, there were at least seventy elections scheduled to take place by year's end—in Iran, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, all over. (Many have since been postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that *Ballot* correspondents are now watching democratic procedures slow to a halt around the world.) Our project has been guided by the idea that, in our siloed media ecosystem, voters rarely get a chance to compare notes about the forces altering our politics, yet it has never been more important to listen to one another. This feels especially valuable to Americans, as the Trump administration has sought a return to isolationism, symbolized by the erection of a border wall. Trump and his advisers—and supporters at outlets like Fox

News and *Breitbart*—have boosted deglobalization, which might make it seem like the United States can go it alone.

But what's been striking, as I've followed elections around the world, is how connected so many of our leaders still are—and by extension, how much voters are linked, too. Many politicians have found that touting nationalism is an expedient platform for gaining support. In practice, though, they are pursuing mutually dependent networks and reshaping existing ones. A new form of populist diplomacy can be seen in alliances between the increasingly authoritarian Hungary and Poland, and in the ways far-right politicians are attempting to remake the European Union to preserve certain economic agreements while dispensing with those having to do with the free movement of people.

As America's global power declines these networks will alter the political future of our country and many others. Shortly after we published a piece by Snigdha Poonam on anti-Muslim bigotry in India's elections, for instance, Donald Trump visited Narendra Modi and stood silent as deadly sectarian violence filled the streets of Delhi. It's hard not to feel that Modi was emboldened by Trump's presence, and that Trump, in turn, was buoyed by the knowledge that the leader of India would never publicly criticize him for racism or violence in his own country.

The Ballot is scrappy. I funded it with money I won from a journalism prize in Europe, where I was reporting on the collapse of centrist politics and the transatlantic relationship. The initial budget for the entire site was about the same

The past few months have shown us how small our world really is. The problems of one place affect everyone.

as what many magazines pay for a single article. Since starting up, my team has received donations from readers around the world; we pay our writers, but we have not taken salaries for our work editing and fact-checking pieces.

The majority of our writers work for English-language newspapers wherever they're based. There is a wealth of local talent who can write as well as, if not more authoritatively than, any parachuting American. In Iran, for example, our correspondent described how a generation of Iranians find little hope in a future marked by US sanctions. In Ireland, one of our stories covered how years of exorbitant housing costs and income inequality revived a left-wing party that had long been a pariah. We have also been tracing the rise of authoritarianism fueled by responses to the coronavirus—everywhere from Malaysia, where the pandemic meant that people couldn't protest an undemocratic reshuffling of their government, to Israel, where Benjamin Netanyahu has used the crisis to stay in power.

International news doesn't boil down to elections alone, of course. But elections represent inflection points in social reckoning; they offer a rare chance for people to express themselves as a group. Voters around the world are struggling with big, existential questions about the future of democracy and republican systems, questions that can't be reduced to candidates' workout routines. The past few months have shown us how small our world really is. The problems of one place affect everyone, everywhere. American media would best serve its citizens if, for once, we looked out rather than in. It's a skill the rest of the world has already learned. **CJR**

“Life has punctured the
bubble of political bullshit
in Washington.”

COMMENTARIAT

When the Pundits Paused

AUTHOR

Simon van Zuylen-Wood



Pick a day. Any day. There's a good chance that David Axelrod has been quoted in a major American publication. Take August 29, 2019, a nice-sounding day. Joe Biden has been telling a story that doesn't add up, about pinning a star on a naval officer. Critics accuse him not of lying, but of mental decline. The *Washington Post* publishes the scoop. Axelrod shares it on Twitter. "@JoeBiden is a gaffe and embellishment machine," he observes. "But if you read to the end of this story, it also reflects something that is a real strength, and that is his empathy." Axelrod's take is cited in follow-ups by FoxNews.com and *The Guardian*. The Associated Press runs a piece, by Bill Barrow and Thomas Beaumont, quoting him. "Where it becomes problematical is if it's seen as evidence of some sort of decay," Axelrod tells them. "That is obviously a danger." The *New York Times* also publishes an article about this, by Katie Glueck; Axelrod is quoted in that one, too. "In this story you have the risk and strength of Biden, the risk being that he is a gaffe-prone guy," he says. "But on the other hand, he projects extraordinary empathy, and that empathy is a huge strength."

After a Labor Day hiatus, Axelrod is back. On September 6, Maggie Haberman quotes him in a piece for the *Times* about the GOP canceling some primaries. On September 8 he appears in a *New York Post* column about Biden's blunders. On September 11, Axelrod writes an op-ed for the *Times* about how to defeat Donald

Trump. On September 12, Axelrod is a lead source for a *Politico* article called "'Why Are You Pissing in Our Faces?': Inside Warren's War with the Obama Team." Later that night, he is quoted in yet another *Times* piece, this one coauthored by Glueck and Matt Flegenheimer, about a Democratic debate. "There's just a real anxiety about not making a mistake," Axelrod says, among other things.

Axelrod—nom de guerre: Axe—is the Waldo of pundits. He shows up everywhere. From the first Democratic debate, last June, until the coronavirus-hastened end of the primary, journalists at major publications reached him for comment an average of once every other day. (I ran the numbers.) That doesn't include the vast secondary market of articles citing things he has said on Twitter; on CNN, where he is a senior political commentator; or on either of his two podcasts. Part of what makes Axe, who is sixty-five, such a trusty pundit is that reporters don't consider him a pundit. He was the strategist

behind Barack Obama's two presidential campaigns, meaning that he is on the political A-list and his insights haven't yet fossilized. Early on, he was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, making him a member of the tribe. He's liberal, but not boringly partisan. He's establishment, but tends to avoid Beltway platitudes. Who wouldn't want to talk to David Axelrod, a hard-nosed politico in the person of an approachable frump? His trademark walrus mustache, now shaved off, is hard to unsee.

What really makes him the pundit king, though, is something more pedestrian. Axelrod calls reporters back and gives them good quotes. "He speaks in very complete sentences," a campaign reporter told me. "Fluent sentences are obviously really important." Not only that—he uses metaphors and analogies. Pete Buttigieg needs to "keep the balloon in the air." Obama sees himself as a "ref, not a player." Biden is like Mr. Magoo. The more Axelrod's name appears in print, the more journalists call him, reinforcing his credibility. (The Axe economy runs on a pyramid scheme.) If you want an editor to put your story on A1, he is a good guy to quote.

"Pundit," from the Hindi *pandit*, itself from the Sanskrit *pandita*, originally referred to a Brahman scholar or wise man. Is Axelrod a wise man? Maybe he's more like a Greek oracle, known as much for his pithy aphorisms as for his predictions. For reporters on deadline, pithy aphorisms are good. When I asked some of them why they called people like Axe, they mostly preferred to stay anonymous, so as not to offend their sources or out their own questionable methods. One journalist introduced me to the term "quote laundering," in which you elevate the value of your premise by getting a supposed expert to say it for you. Sometimes you need a voice on the record to polish off a story full of anonymous quotes. Sometimes you see a good tweet from a pundit, and then get him to repeat it for you in print. (See: the *New York Times*, August 29, 2019.)

What winds up on the page is not necessarily revelatory. "There's a tendency to quote people who stay between the forty-yard lines of the Republican and Democratic Parties," Jonathan Tamari, a political reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, told me. "One of the reasons a lot of us missed what was going on in 2016 is probably that a lot of the people who get quoted very often, who we go to for insight, live by the traditional rules of politics." Donald Trump didn't play by those rules, and his victory blindsided the commentariat.

After the shock of Trump's win, many political reporters vowed to rethink their approach. Except they didn't. There was no discernible change in habit, and pundits multiplied. Overstuffed cable news sets now resemble NFL pregame shows. (Jonathan Mahler, of the *New York Times Magazine*, called them "Last Supper-size panels.") To what end? Writing in the *New Republic*, Walter Shapiro, a veteran campaign reporter, ticked through the various "narratives" that dominated pundits' chatter in February alone: "Joe Biden will limp to inevitable victory; Bernie Sanders is the likely delegate leader; it's a Sanders-versus-Mike Bloomberg race; welcome to a contested convention in Milwaukee; and after the Nevada caucuses, Sanders is unbeatable."

Then COVID-19 began ravaging the United States, and the presidential campaigns dried up. If the Trump era inflated a pundit bubble, I thought, maybe the pandemic would pop it. So, like many others

before me, I called Axelrod. He was quarantining with family in Arizona and picked up his cellphone without recognizing the number. How was he doing? "My anticipation was that I was going to be talking every week about the primaries," he said. "It became obvious as March began, and particularly as March wore on, that that wasn't going to be the case."

He hadn't been on-set at CNN since March 17, two weeks earlier. "I think it was probably the last time there was a large assembly of people there," he said. "We were already observing social distancing—our panel was shrunken, so we could space out more." The writing was on the wall. At the end of the night, somebody joked, "See you in November." The good news was that if CNN needed him back, he'd be on call. "They sent me equipment," he said. "I've got a little rig in my house, so I can go on the air when necessary."

I asked Axelrod what he made of the coronavirus. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime—hopefully—pandemic," he said. "The suffering is obvious, and the outlook is unclear. So the campaign, like every other aspect of our lives, has been overtaken by the virus. If you're a commentator on politics, you're kind of a spare part in the garage." How did it feel to be a spare part? "Eh, I think it would be colossally obtuse and unfeeling to complain about that," he replied. "I personally want to see, on television, experts. I don't want to see bloviators about politics."

As ever, he knew just what to say. Still, his comment made me wonder if Axe and company were in existential crisis. Would pundits be swept aside by a new demand for facts over opinion? Or would they simply flip themselves upright, like tide-swept crabs, and keep on talking?

David Broder and Hunter Thompson walk into a bar. It's about 3pm on a sweltering weekday afternoon in June 1972, in a Midtown dive called the New York Lounge. Broder, forty-two, of the *Washington Post*, is an ultra-square obsessed with the virtues of the two-party system. He sips a Coke. Thompson is Thompson. He drinks beers and margaritas. With them is Thompson's *Rolling Stone* colleague Timothy Crouse, who drinks scotch and will write this



GOOD TALKER

The pundit king, awaiting questions.

up in his book *The Boys on the Bus*. Thompson is up four hundred dollars on Broder, from betting on various state primary elections. Broder is trying to account for his bad prognostications, which also appear in print. “The most distressing thing about covering politics,” he complains, “is that the guy who was absolutely right, whose wisdom was almost breathtaking one election year—you go back to that same man for wisdom some other year, and he’ll be as dumb as dog-shit.” His takeaway: “I think it would have been useful for me to get out of Washington more.” Instead, Broder returns to Washington, never leaves, and rides out a storied *Post* career as a centrist pundit.

For more on the roots of modern punditry, I called Shapiro, who has covered every presidential campaign of the past forty years. Foundations were laid in 1966 with William Buckley’s erudite PBS debate show, *Firing Line*, but the pundit industry, Shapiro figured, really took off in the early eighties, when the Broders of the world started appearing on TV. “I blame everything on *The McLaughlin*

Group,” he said, referring to the syndicated political shouting match refereed by John McLaughlin. (The original show ended its run after McLaughlin died, in 2016, though a McLaughlin-less *McLaughlin* has since resurfaced.) “The fact is, there was money to be made in aggressively mouthing off on TV, because you became famous and that meant you got to go on the corporate speech circuit.” (Those gigs pay well.) *McLaughlin* debuted in 1982, the same year as CNN’s *Crossfire*. From then on, the live-argument format propped up an entire class of well-compensated blowhards. “George Carlin said there were seven words you couldn’t say on TV,” Shapiro told me. “Now there are three: ‘I don’t know.’” (If Shapiro ever wants to get into the punditry racket, he knows his way around a one-liner.) And so we have *Morning Joe*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *The Circus*, and engorged debate-night iterations of *Anderson Cooper 360*.

Let’s take a moment to define terms. A pundit can’t simply be a person who broadcasts his political opinions in public. In the age of Twitter, that describes too many people.

“I used to have anxiety dreams about accidentally agreeing to go on some other TV channel.”

Rather, a pundit must be sought out, like a village elder. By my definition, a talk radio host or an academic or a high-volume social media poster is never by default a pundit, but can become one as soon as other credentialed people begin calling.

Because pundits are anointed, rather than self-made, they tend to be typecast. One of the most abundant species is the never-Trump conservative consultant, such as Steve Schmidt, Rick Wilson, John Weaver, and Mike Murphy, who hosts a podcast with Axelrod called *Hacks on Tap*. Out of favor with the GOP, they are free to throw bombs while maintaining the insider credibility of apostates. Schmidt is known to give you whatever you want to hear in the most colorful, flamboyantly obscene terms. Wilson sees the world through a Trump-crime-syndicate lens, and will say so. (These are some of the same gurus whose credibility was supposedly damaged when the candidates paying them lost to Trump, in 2016.) They know their audience, and are happy to serve.

There are also the Trump-whisperers. Salena Zito, a former columnist for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, scored a book deal and a CNN contract on the strength of a phrase: Trump’s supporters, she wrote, “take him seriously, but not literally.” Jeffrey Lord, a former Ronald Reagan aide who was living with his ninety-seven-year-old mom and trying to write thrillers, became CNN’s first pro-Trump pundit after publishing a few positive pieces about him in the *American Spectator*. There are the popular historians, like Douglas Brinkley, Michael Beschloss, and Doris Kearns Goodwin. There are the electeds who become more famous on TV than they were in office. Harold Ford Jr., an ex-MSNBC fixture, pioneered that art form. CNN’s Bakari Sellers, a former state representative from South Carolina, is the next generation.

In 2019, CNN hired Alexandra Rojas, the executive director of Justice Democrats, a left-wing PAC. She was one of the few pro-Sanders commentators on cable news. Because the pundit economy tends to reward people who are established, the insurgent left has had a harder time breaking through. Krystal Ball, a progressive who cohosts a show on *The Hill*’s website with a conservative commentator named Saagar Enjeti, was poised to become a national star, until the nomination slipped from Sanders’s grasp. The pundit economy doesn’t run on merit. And mostly, it rewards people who answer the phone.

If the old way to monetize punditry was landing on the speechmaking circuit, the new way is landing a cable news contract. Pre-Trump, CNN thrived on developing stories: the O.J. chase, Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon spill. But after Jeff Zucker took over the network, in 2013, he struggled to keep it relevant in the absence of breaking news. MSNBC and Fox News found themselves better positioned to cover the polarized politics of the Obama era. Then came Trump, who started running for president in 2015. Zucker, who had presided over *The Apprentice* during a past life at NBC, stuck him on TV at every

opportunity. Rallies were carried live; Trump called in constantly.

In August 2016, an underappreciated shift occurred. Steve Bannon replaced Paul Manafort as Trump's campaign chairman and tilted the effort toward a right-wing base. Trump halted his regular interviews with CNN; instead, he started calling it names. CNN filled the void by hiring people to talk *about* Trump. Enter the pundits. Most of them were adversarial; then there were the handful plucked from obscurity to speak in his defense. Partly, that was for balance. Mostly, it was for entertainment. "The political-panel strategy was purely for television ratings," a former CNN executive told me. A typical scenario: CNN runs an outrageous Trump statement by a formerly obscure Trumpist who then contorts herself into knots to defend Trump, provoking an anti-Trump talking head to go ape. Instant conflict. "Obviously the panels became a point of controversy, leading up to and beyond the election," the former executive added. "All noise, no news."

I called David Gergen, a *Washington Post* writer and longtime CNN pundit, to ask about the recent proliferation of his kind. He was sheltering in place on Martha's Vineyard. "Some of the younger people are just terrific, some of the most promising journalists," he said. "Some other people who walk through, it's like, where do they find these people?"

In 2017, Zucker described his growing contributor network, as the pundit ranks are called, as "characters in a drama." "Everybody says, 'Oh, I can't believe you have Jeffrey Lord or Kayleigh McEnany,'" he told the *Times Magazine*, the latter being a twenty-nine-year-old pro-Trump law student he started putting on the air. "But you know what? They know who Jeffrey Lord and Kayleigh McEnany are." This past April, McEnany was named White House press secretary.

There are two classes of paid CNN pundit: "commentator" and "analyst." Commentators tend to be partisan. Axelrod is a commentator. Analysts are subject-matter experts. Within the analyst class, there are a handful of major sub-categories: legal, national security, political, and, now, medical. Print journalists are well-represented in this class: Haberman, of the

Times, was one of the political analysts hired in the Zucker era; Jeffrey Toobin, of *The New Yorker*, has been a legal analyst for CNN since 2002. Some people have "senior" in their titles; others don't. It's not clear what this signifies. Punditry has been a major growth area since 2015; CNN won't reveal precise numbers, but a high-ranking person at the network told me the roster now includes somewhere under a hundred fifty talkers.

CNN contracts tend to run for one or two years. The salaries aren't public, but network sources told me that they ranged from \$25,000 to more than \$200,000. One pundit revealed, without a name attached, a salary in the high five figures. Almost everyone else I asked said, after awkward pauses, that they didn't want to disclose their earnings. Lucky for me, in March, the *Hollywood Reporter* published financial disclosure forms of ex-Trump officials, revealing how much Fox News had compensated certain people before they joined the administration. I figured the paychecks were comparable across networks. From 2013 to 2017, Scott Brown, a former US senator from Massachusetts, got \$175,000 a year. (He is now the US ambassador to New Zealand.) Anthony Scaramucci, who had a crash-and-burn stint as White House communications director, earned \$88,461 as a Fox Business Network contributor. John Bolton, the former national security adviser, was pulling \$569,423. Axelrod, who used to have a Saturday show on CNN, and still hosts a CNN podcast called *The Axe Files*, is likely paid on the high end. (When I asked him the amount, he wouldn't say.)

Once contributors sign on—at CNN, at least—they're free to go on any of the network's shows they like, by negotiating directly with producers. Outside podcasts, radio, and speeches are usually fine. The only thing they can't do is sleep with the enemy. "I used to have anxiety dreams about accidentally agreeing to go on some other TV channel," a CNN political analyst told me.

That creates a strange dynamic with the legions of on-staff CNN journalists, armed with original reporting, who find themselves in competition for airtime with talking heads—some of whom, like Haberman, have allegiances to other outlets. "They have a stockpile of weaponry, and they maybe sometimes

aren't as strategic about who they have and how they use them," the former CNN executive said. "There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and only probably six hours in the programming schedule that really matter."

Working as a TV pundit is some of the easiest money in journalism. Setting aside the election night workhorses, the average contributor probably isn't on air for more than thirty minutes a week. (Other kinds of labor are sometimes involved: Lord used to get ferried three hours each way from his home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, every time he went to the studio in New York.) If producers need you, you're on retainer, and supposed to show up. But you're not exactly obligated. "If they asked you on every day, you could say no," Wajahat Ali, a commentator CNN hired last year, told me. "At the same time, there's an unspoken rule: if you keep saying no, they're not going to call you anymore." And then they might not renew your contract. Besides, Ali said, he likes going on television. The exposure has been nice. In the past, when he did cable for free, "It was, 'Oh, here's the Muslim guy.'" Now, having built up relationships with CNN producers, he'll go on to discuss any number of things. "It's been really good. I get to flex."

And, really, what otherwise crummily paid writer is going to pass up \$75,000 to speak his mind for a few minutes a week on national TV? Which, of course, poses a problem. It is famously verboten, outside the realm of tabloid journalism, to pay sources. The theory being, you can't trust what someone's saying if he's saying it to get paid. Yet on cable, the practice takes place at all hours.

CNN has a pundit czar. Her name is Rebecca Kutler. A nineteen-year veteran of the network, she has for the past five been scouting and courting contributors. We spoke in April. Kutler, forty, was hunkered down at home with her family in Bethesda, Maryland. "This part of the industry has grown a lot in the last few years," she told me. I asked why. "Well, there's more networks and more competition for the best experts—to be able to showcase them. In order to do that, the business has changed a bit." The trend toward enormous political panels has required her to do more hiring; the general theory seems to be that a channel-flipping viewer should easily

find someone relatable to root for. As such, diversity—of race, gender, ideology—is crucial. It also helps if you look good on TV. (The universe of print-quoted pundits tends to be more white and male.)

I asked Kutler what she seeks in contributors. "I wake up every day trying to think about, 'What is CNN covering in the news, in the week and month ahead? Do we have the best experts in the world to explain *that* to our audience?'" Kutler brought in Preet Bharara, the superstar ex-federal prosecutor; he went on to discuss abuses of power in the Trump White House. She scooped up Andrew Yang a week after he dropped out of the presidential race; he dissected the performances of his former rivals. Once pundits have been put on air, two factors are essential, Kutler said. One: "You have to have real expertise and bring a differentiated point of view." Two: "You have to be a clear communicator. You have to be able to take ideas in your head, your heart, and share them clearly and concisely on TV." You need to speak in complete sentences.

On *Hacks on Tap*, Axelrod and Murphy shoot the shit about politics for an hour; gurgling beer-pouring noises are piped in to simulate a tavern atmosphere. On March 19, Axelrod began the show in a state of puzzlement. "I can't figure out what the hell is going on here," he said. "Let me tell you what's bugging me, you guys. I was trying to think about how to start this podcast. [Murphy] mentioned the primary. That's what we do, right? We cover the great pageant of democracy, and we bring that sort of strategist view to it." But the primary had ground to a halt. Their purpose wasn't clear. Murphy put a finer point on it: "Real life has now punctured the bubble of political bullshit in Washington."

Across pundit-land, one could hear the sound of screeching tires. Gergen told me that he was using his hiatus to read Marcus Aurelius. Michael Steele—a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, now an MSNBC pundit—said that he had been getting bumped. "Instead of coming in on an A block in between 7 and 7:15 on what used to be *Hardball*, you're now coming in on C or D block." Not only that: because President Trump's daily coronavirus briefings began at

“Conventional wisdom is a perilous thing.”

5:30pm, any chance of appearing on-screen in the early evening was all but shot, Steele said. “Yesterday, I was on Ari Melber’s show in the beginning, but then the president’s press conference went to 7pm.” Ali told me the last time he was on air was March 3, for one of the Super Tuesday panels. “Being the son of immigrants, I’m like, ‘You guys pay me every month—I want to be useful,’” he said. “Another part of me is like, ‘This is corona-virus. This is a global pandemic. Maybe the world doesn’t need to hear more political punditry.’” Ali’s contract would be up in June, and he’d been discussing his predicament with fellow talking heads. “Will they retain us? Are they all in on doctors? Nobody knows.” Pivoting, Ali got in touch with *The Atlantic* and wrote a couple of coronavirus pieces for its website.

This is an exceptional time, yet the pause on political pundits is in fact an unusually bracing version of something that happens regularly. In 2019, thanks to the Mueller investigation and then impeachment, federal prosecutors were in vogue on cable TV. By early 2020, they had been booted for politics people. A while ago, Ali was talking to a CNN legal analyst who brought up the meme

in which a boyfriend is checking out a hot chick in full view of his girlfriend, who looks on appalled. At the time, the legal analyst was the girlfriend, CNN was the boyfriend, and political pundits were the hot chick. Then came corona. Suddenly, doctors were the hot chick, and everyone else was the girlfriend. (Later, the news would change course again, as the nation filled with protests against police brutality, and CNN would forget about its new doctors for a while.)

Cable news shifts mercurially from one story to the next; certain pundits, whatever their realm of expertise, wind up filling the gap between breaking news and ground-level reporting. Sometimes, that means they have to reach past what they really know. “Part of what I think is troubling about the modern media template is, technology has allowed us to do everything remotely, including, you know, polls up the wazoo,” Axelrod said. “One place where news organizations have cut back is on travel. My neighbors in Chicago couldn’t imagine Donald Trump winning, and my neighbors in rural Michigan, where I have a place, could not imagine him losing. Most journalists live in the first environment, not the second.” It’s hard to speak on behalf

of the country when you see only a fraction of it. And, as COVID-19 reminds us, it's impossible to predict the future.

Surely, some pundits must realize that what they say is ephemeral and often wrong. In 2005, Philip Tetlock, a social scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, published *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, a seminal book on political prediction, examining eighty thousand forecasts made by two hundred eighty-four political "experts" from 1984 to 2003. The pundits may as well have been flipping coins; the worst prognosticators tended to be the most famous. One explanation: pundits aren't really interested in accuracy. Quoting Richard Posner, the jurist, Tetlock argues that pundits traffic in "solidarity" goods, rather than "credence" goods. We absorb punditry, in other words, not because we're interested in truth, but to ratify our political identities.

Or maybe pundits *aren't* self-aware. I asked Steele if the Trump era, or the fallout from the pandemic, had led him to reconsider any of the wisdom he'd banked in his career. "Nope," he said. I asked Steele if Republican support for the largest economic stimulus package in United States history, designed to prop up the wrecked economy, had made him rethink any of his small-government principles. "Nope," he repeated. He dismissed the idea, he said, "that you get into a crisis and change what you believe and walk away from that."

Scrambling for takes early on in the coronavirus outbreak, the commentariat didn't drape itself in glory. On March 11, after several weeks of lying about or minimizing the crisis, the president delivered a formal address from his desk in the Oval Office. "Trump's tone tonight more serious, a welcome change," Gergen tweeted. Several days later, Trump participated in a briefing. "He is being the kind of leader that people need," Dana Bash, CNN's chief political correspondent, said, praising his "tone." Interspersed with these appearances were an attack on "Sleepy Joe Biden" and a smirk upon being told that Sen. Mitt Romney had entered protective quarantine ("Gee, that's too bad," Trump said). It took a while for the pundits to catch on.

On March 24, *Hacks on Tap* returned with its latest installment. The hosts debated how Joe Biden should engage with voters in quarantine. Murphy was nonplussed by the campaign's troubled efforts to beam Biden to the internet. "It undercuts the competence thing," he said. "If they can't put together a live feed, then how is he going to handle corona 3.0 in two years?"

Axe agreed. "That's what the Trump people have picked up on," he said. "They are sniping at him about the quality of his broadcasts." He took a beat. "I don't know that it means anything," he added. "I don't know that anything means anything."

One day in April, I spent my waking hours watching CNN. I was looking for pundits. Between 10:30am and noon CNN featured on-the-ground COVID-19 reporting from Shanghai, Rome, and Brooklyn. At noon, the network aired Governor Andrew Cuomo's daily briefing. At 2:12pm Anderson Cooper interviewed Sanjay Gupta, the chief medical correspondent. Around 6pm, I watched Trump's daily briefing. At 7:07, CNN cut away from the briefing for *Erin Burnett OutFront*. (MSNBC kept the briefing on.) Jim Acosta, CNN's chief White House correspondent, commented on

the president's remarks: "A stunning performance by someone who clearly has his back up against the wall." At 8:25pm, Cooper interviewed Chuck Schumer, the Senate majority leader. At 8:44pm, CNN phoned an outside political analyst—*At last*, I thought, after a bleary-eyed day mainlining cable news—Josh Dawsey, a *Washington Post* White House reporter. At 11:48pm Haberman called in. But I didn't see anybody discuss the campaigns, except insofar as they reviewed Trump's leadership performance.

I asked Kutler about the new era. "We went about hiring some of the best infectious-disease experts and doctors, to help our audience once again understand what's happening," she said. She named a few of them. Was it difficult to transition from political pundits to medical experts? "It hasn't been a challenge at all," she said. "Doctors are usually pretty great communicators." In June, Ali, the political commentator, did not get his contract renewed. Kutler called to let him down gently, saying that he was a casualty of CNN's turn to COVID-19 coverage.

By then, prime-time viewership was up 117 percent from 2019. Zucker told the *Times*, "Between now and November, there's no chance it's a normal political year." Even as the Black Lives Matter movement bumped the virus off front pages and cable news ran live coverage of the protests, he maintained that COVID-19 would remain the "principal story of our time."

Still, the coronavirus is, of course, also a political story. And CNN continued to employ plenty of political pundits. After not too long, the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic became the dominant theme of Democratic attack ads. That pundits remained relatively muted during the same period seemed doubly interesting, since the era in which they proliferated was also defined by unpredictability. When the universe of Trump has felt out of control, the pundits have rushed in with tidy narratives to help restore order. They weren't just characters, as Zucker would have it. They were storytellers, too. And Axelrod, as a tribune of the Obama era, was—for a certain kind of political junkie—a particularly trustworthy narrator.

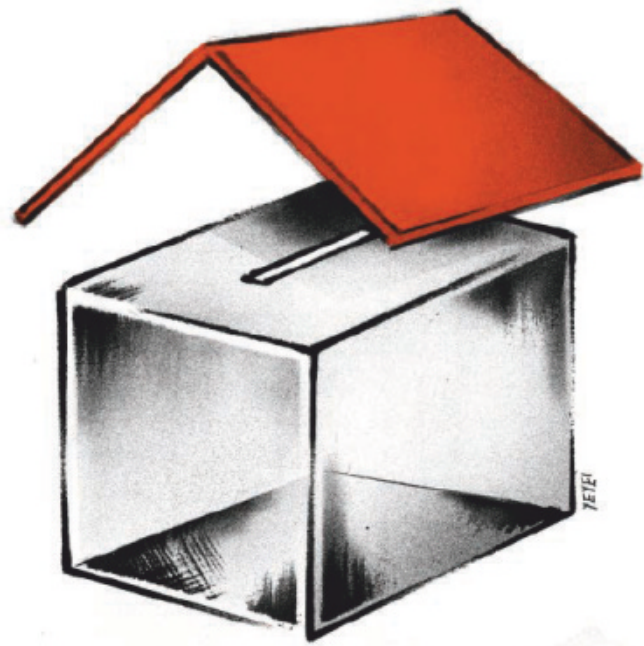
When I asked Axe why he left politics for

media—first at MSNBC, in 2013, before jumping to CNN, in 2015—he said that he didn’t intend to be a partisan talking head. “Temperamentally, you know, my orientation is to try to be calm and to be reflective, and I think there’s actually a need for that now,” he said. “Everybody is so reactive.” Rather, he hoped to serve as a kind of elder, available to impart his forty years of wisdom about professional politics unto younger generations. He had served in campaigns and in government, at the highest level. “There are other people like that,” he said, “but not many.” (Karl Rove, James Carville—figures in the emeritus stage of their careers.) “The thing about commentary,” he said, “is that it’s better if it’s informed.”

No doubt there is comfort, during times of uncertainty, in watching seasoned practitioners hold forth with conviction. But that doesn’t mean pundits should be considered essential workers. There’s only so much sagacity that can be conveyed in a seven-minute TV segment or a two-sentence quote. Even before the virus struck, there were too many bloviators. As Axelrod put it, in a Hall of Fame Axe-ism, “Conventional wisdom is a perilous thing.”

Gradually, though, as summer dawned, campaign coverage started to pick up; the pundits were reenlisted. Maureen Dowd, working on a column for the *Times* about bats, viruses, and White House bloodsuckers, called Axelrod for a quote. He gave her what she needed. “Trump is like a vampire!” Axe told her, adding an expletive that the *Times* couldn’t publish. “You’ve got to drive a stake right through his heart.” A few weeks later, Axelrod waded into the national conversation about systemic racism, offering an out-of-the-blue mea culpa in the *Washington Post*, headlined, “I thought I understood issues of race. I was wrong.”

Wanted or not, the talking heads will continue to pop up. As they do, blame not the Axelrods, who do their best to say smart things when reporters call, but the media outlets that use pundits as a crutch. “If I look at my email, at six or seven inquiries, I just try to hit as many as I can,” Axelrod told me. “If people think I have something to offer, if I can help illuminate something, then I’m gonna respond.” **CJR**



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Zach Montellaro

Politico

My focus has shifted. The election is still incredibly important, but right now I’m focusing on the process of how people actually vote. It’s not a question anymore of *if* people will vote by mail, it’s *how*—and then how prepared the states are. In America, there’s no federalized election system. There are fifty-one different ways people vote. Every state and DC is different. And some states will be better prepared than others.

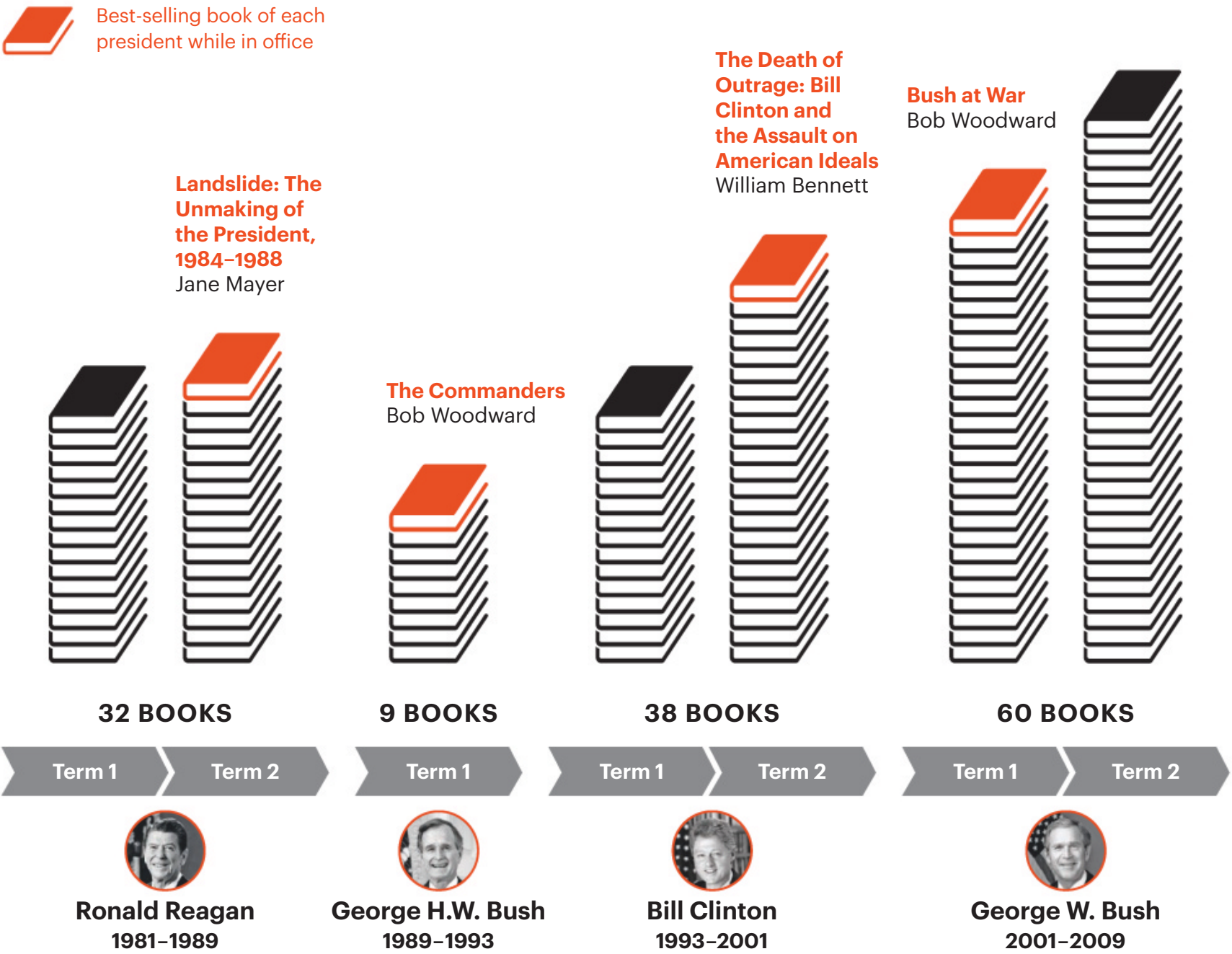
There’s such a wide range of polls on the public. That’s a good way to get a view of what the public thinks instead of trying to call up one or two voters. Because that’s what you do when you’re at an event: you go talk to people in the crowd. I don’t have to guess what the American public thinks about voting by mail. I know, because polling shows it.

DATA

Publishing Power

In 2018, Michelle Wolf appeared at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner—and she may have been the last comedian to do so under President Trump. “You pretend like you hate him,” she told reporters. “But he has helped you. He has helped you sell your papers and your books and your TV. You helped create this monster, and now you are profiting off of him.” She wasn’t kidding. The publishing industry has produced more material on Trump than any president before, with books selling in the millions.

DATA COMPILED BY
Akintunde Ahmad
Savannah Jacobson
Lauren Harris



**The Amateur:
Barack Obama in
the White House**
Edward Klein



71 BOOKS

Term 1

Term 2



Barack Obama
2009–2017

Fire and Fury
Michael Wolff
1,018,748
copies sold



86 BOOKS

Term 1



Donald Trump
2017–?

John Bolton's new tell-all, *The Room Where It Happened*, kicks off what will be a flurry of Trump books coming this summer and fall, including one from **Mary Trump**, the president's niece; another from **Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster**, his second national security adviser; and two titles from reporters at the *Washington Post*, about his impeachment.

ABOUT THE NUMBERS CJR counted the number of biographies, White House and campaign memoirs, investigations, and policy examinations published about each president while he served in office. Sources included the Library of Congress, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum, Google Books, and Amazon. To determine the best-selling book published about each president during his administration, CJR relied on data from the *Publishers Weekly* archives, *New York Times* archives, Nielsen BookScan, and Amazon.

THE POLICE BRUTALITY CRISIS





Police abolition has entered the 2020 campaign. Reporters have some homework to do.

AUTHOR
Jack Herrera

Prior to May 25—the day Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, killed George Floyd, a Black man, while three other cops looked on—“Defund the Police” was not a message widely repeated in the press. But after that day, it was impossible to ignore. Protesters across the country were painting it onto cardboard signs and boarded-up windows. In march after march, the phrase could be heard in chants and shouts. Reporting from a protest in Oakland, I saw the words scribbled in Sharpie across a skateboard.

By June, “Defund the Police” had spawned an entire genre of coverage. “Defund the police? Here’s what that really means,” a headline in the *Washington Post* read. “There’s a growing call to defund the police. Here’s what it means,” offered CNN. *The Guardian* asked, “What does ‘Defund the Police’ mean?” posing the same question that would appear three days later in *New York* magazine as “What Could ‘Defund the Police’ Mean in Practice?” Similar pieces ran in the *New York Times*, NPR, the *Miami Herald*, *Esquire*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, MTV.com, *Rolling Stone*, and dozens of other outlets.

By their titles, these explainers may have appeared almost all the same, but in fact they varied dramatically. Journalists discussed “Defund the Police” as a slogan ripe for interpretation. “It’s become something of a semantic argument about what that means, exactly,”

Willie Geist, an MSNBC anchor, told viewers. For some, it was simply a strong call for reform—more body cameras, no choke holds. For others, it was a rallying cry for revolution, including a complete abolition of police departments. A reader could be forgiven for finding the resources hard to parse. Soon, an awkward reality set in: many journalists were trying to explain a concept with which they had little familiarity. As the clumsy reporting continued, arguments over the “real” definition of “Defund the Police” became a battleground, leading to another round of pieces—in *The Atlantic*, the *New Republic*, *The Hill*, and other publications—that provided frustrated-tone correctives on how the media had gotten the protesters’ demand wrong.

There was another category of coverage, too, one that performed the maneuver of a matador with a muleta: pieces that simply stepped away from the charging beast of the debate. Instead of actually engaging with any

Suddenly, defunding the police had exploded as a central campaign plot point.

of the demands to defund the police, a large portion of the political press instead focused on the phrase itself and how it would play in the 2020 presidential election. “Is ‘Defund the Police’ a massive political mistake?” CNN’s Chris Cillizza asked, wondering aloud if the broadsides against cops could hurt Democrats trying to pick up middle-of-the-road voters. Like much of the coverage on cable news and in national newspapers, Cillizza’s analysis didn’t bother to weigh the value—or even the basic details—of police abolition policy, but rather considered how it might affect the chances of Joe Biden, a centrist, as President Donald Trump busied himself painting a picture of a far-left radical. Would the mere existence of the term “Defund the Police” tar Biden as a revolutionary? “The political problem for Democrats is this: They are now being backed into a corner by activists who are demanding radical change,” Cillizza wrote. Others chimed in. “Defunding police will

lead to Republican victory this year,” according to a piece in *The Hill*. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., a professor of African-American studies at Princeton, suggested on MSNBC that Biden “might want to distance himself from the slogan, but he shouldn’t distance himself from the substance of the policy.”

A couple of months ago, it would have seemed strange, even ridiculous, if a debate moderator had asked the lineup of 2020 Democratic hopefuls, “Do you support defunding police nationwide?” The question of taking money away from cops did not register on the radar of candidates or campaign reporters. Now, suddenly, it had exploded as a central campaign plot point. Journalists asked Biden, his cast of vice-presidential hopefuls, and most other prominent Democrats to offer their views on taking money away from police. The Biden campaign placed op-eds in the *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today* declaring his allegiance to police departments; he also said

as much in an interview on the *CBS Evening News with Norah O'Donnell*. Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House; Jim Clyburn, the House whip; and Sen. Bernie Sanders also came out strongly in opposition to defunding the police.

Alex Vitale, whose book *The End of Policing* was published in 2017, watched with some disappointment as the defunding-as-election-hurdle narrative unfolded. “Now all people are interested in is its relationship to national politics,” he told me. “And then the voices that they bring in are people who are a part of *that* world, and who are not a part of the movement, and who have often spent years working *against* it.” Defunding the police was never a mainstream Democratic idea, after all. Demands to defund and abolish the police have existed for decades, but in the kinds of places journalists and presidential contenders rarely go and even more rarely come from: overpoliced neighborhoods, underserved Black communities, and Black feminist spaces.

The underinformed takes raged on. Cameras pivoted away from the masses filling the streets and scanned back to the marble halls of the US Capitol: *Here, now, the Democrats are kneeling in honor of George Floyd and—for some ineffable reason—wearing kente cloth; now watch as Kamala Harris, VP hopeful, debates “Defund the Police” with Meghan McCain on The View.* Covering the 2020 presidential election has been no easy task, to be sure; the pandemic turned the standard horse race into a frantic trek across an unfamiliar wilderness. Still, the way political coverage has engaged with the country’s anti-racist uprising has often felt inadequate, even hackish, especially when it has assumed that calls to ban police departments must be novel, and can’t be literal. (“A three-word slogan is not a detailed policy agenda,” Matthew Yglesias wrote, for *Vox*.) “The news media is acting like abolition is a new idea,” Samah Sisay, a lawyer and activist, told me. “‘Defund the Police’ already existed as an abolitionist demand. But it’s not being framed that way.”

According to Alisa Bierria, a Black feminist philosopher and assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside, there are two ways to think about the movement that has led to “Defund the Police.” One is to look

at recent community organizing; the other is to reach back to Angela Davis and other Black feminist radicals of the 1970s. “There’s a way in which abolitionist work that’s coming from radical Black feminism and radical queer politics gets submerged,” Bierria said. “When people see something on a sign at a protest, or see something as a hashtag on Twitter, it’s hard for them to understand that it’s connected to this broader trajectory and legacy.”

In 1971, Davis wrote an essay from inside the Marin County Jail, north of the Golden Gate Bridge. At twenty-seven, she already had a remarkable biography. In 1963, a Ku Klux Klan church bombing had killed four young girls in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama; two of the victims had been her friends. Within several years, Davis joined the Black Panthers and got fired from a professorship for her communist views; now she was jailed on a dubious charge connecting her to an armed takeover of a courtroom. In her cell, Davis contemplated the role of the police—those who had imprisoned her, and those who had not indicted the Klansmen who killed the girls in Birmingham. “The announced function of the police, ‘to protect and serve the people,’” she wrote, “becomes the grotesque caricature of protecting and preserving the interests of our oppressors and serving us nothing but injustice.”

In 1997, Davis—along with Ruth Wilson Gilmore and other Black feminists and activists—formed Critical Resistance, a group dedicated to the abolition of police departments and jails, known collectively as the prison-industrial complex. Three years later, a network of feminists of color, joined by the name INCITE!, organized a conference called “The Color of Violence”; Davis was the keynote speaker. Now seventy-six, she has been enshrined by leftists as a luminary; lately, she’s been in demand to appear before wider audiences. “Of course, when many of us began to talk about abolishing these institutions, back in the seventies, we were treated as if we were absolutely out of our minds,” she told WBUR. Today, she added, “I see myself as witnessing this moment for all of those who lost their lives in the struggle over the decades.”

Her comments reflect just how much things have changed in her lifetime. In recent

“There’s a way in which abolitionist work that’s coming from radical Black feminism and radical queer politics gets submerged.”

years, the modern abolition movement has grown steadily, as police brutality has been captured more and more on camera and many Americans, especially in majority-Black neighborhoods, have become disillusioned by failed attempts at reform. In 2012, in Florida, a seventeen-year-old Black teenager named Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, who was the neighborhood-watch coordinator for a gated community; Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges. In response to the murder, a group of college-age Black, Latinx, and Arab people formed the Dream Defenders, an organization “serious about fighting for a world without prisons and police.” In 2013, the Dream Defenders staged a thirty-one-day takeover of the Florida state capitol to protest the outcome of Zimmerman’s case. The same year—inspired, in part, by the Dream Defenders—the Black Lives Matter movement took to the streets, embarking on the relentless work of

forcing Americans to confront police violence. (Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, affirmed her support for the abolition of police in a June interview with *Newsweek*.)

One of the most ardent fighters in the modern abolition movement has been Mariame Kaba, the activist known on Twitter as @prisonculture. In 2009, she founded Project NIA, an advocacy organization combating the criminalization and incarceration of children and young adults. In the years that followed, Kaba hosted conferences, gave speeches, and traveled widely. She also frequently wrote articles; her children’s book *Missing Daddy* is about a girl whose father is in prison. In 2016, Kaba was among a group of lawyers, people in prison, community leaders, and others who established Survived and Punished (S+P), another abolitionist organization, which works to stop sexual violence and the criminalization of survivors.

Efforts such as these, focused on eliminating police departments and replacing them with more compassionate forms of justice, have been developing for years just below the mainstream—quiet and immense and waiting to erupt past the surface, like the dramatic formation of a new island. An observant journalist could see evidence of this. In 2017, Tracey L. Meares, a Yale Law School professor and member of President Barack Obama’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, wrote in the *Boston Review* that “policing as we know it must be abolished before it can be transformed,” citing Kaba. In 2019, Critical Resistance was part of a coalition of activists that succeeded in ending a SWAT emergency training expo called Urban Shield. The ongoing campaign to eliminate Immigration and Customs Enforcement has some origins in the abolition movement—the language of “people in cages” comes from abolitionist rhetoric; many immigrant activists and attorneys identify as abolitionists, too. Recently, in Los Angeles, Black Lives Matter helped persuade the city council to advance a proposal that would move as much as \$150 million of the police department’s operating budget (totaling nearly \$2 billion) to health and housing programs.

In Minneapolis, the heart of the latest protests, the demand to defund the police appeared well before this spring. Back in 2007, five high-ranking Black officers sued their department for institutional racism; the case included death threats sent to every Black person on the force, signed “KKK.” The American Civil Liberties Union reported in 2015 that Black people in Minneapolis were about nine times more likely than whites to be arrested for low-grade offenses such as disorderly conduct and lurking. That year, in the north of the city, two white police officers, Mark Ringgenberg and Dustin Schwarze, shot and killed a Black twenty-four-year-old named Jamar Clark. In 2016, an officer shot Philando Castile to death. Around that time, the Center for Policing Equity, a think tank, began working with the Minneapolis Police Department to curb burdensome and inequitable police practices. “The Minneapolis police have struggled for a long time with pockets of resistance to those kinds of changes,” Phillip Atiba Goff, one of the Center’s

leaders, recently told the *New York Times Magazine*. “One terrible lesson of George Floyd’s death is that we don’t have mechanisms to stop terrible officers from doing terrible things on a given shift.”

Turning a city’s pain into a basis for research, a coalition of local residents reviewed decades of police violence against Black people in Minneapolis. The nominal occasion was the department’s 150th anniversary, but the necessity came from the blood in the streets. In 2017, after completing dozens of case studies, the group produced a report. There was a clear conclusion: “Abolition, not reform, is the way forward.”

As June wore on, many of the political journalists who had initially covered “Defund the Police” as a breaking news story caught up on their reading. Outlets began to produce pieces that were less reactive, more nuanced. The *New York Times* ran an op-ed by Kaba settling the confusion over “semantics”; its title was “Yes, we mean literally abolish the police.” Still, scrutinizing the policy proposals, not everyone was persuaded. The idea of dismantling police departments—according to some writers at *Vox*, *The Marshall Project*, and other publications—was to be judged as a set of outlines, not as the result of deep frustration that’s built up in the places reporters too frequently ignore. They still didn’t get it.

“When you see ‘Defund the Police’ on signs, you have to understand that, for so many of us, it’s a placeholder for something much deeper—it has a much bigger spiritual and epistemic commitment behind it,” Bierria said. The modern abolition movement, she added, has been guided by Black feminism, which rejects accepted notions of crime and punishment. “As Black women, we exist at the intersections of so many kinds of violence: state violence, sexual violence, racist violence. And that puts us in a unique position to find a politics that responds to that multidimensionality of violence.”

The problem with journalists’ coverage of police abolition cannot be disentangled from the lack of diversity within newsrooms. Minority groups make up nearly 40 percent of the population of the United States but only about 17 percent of newsroom staff at

print and online publications, and only 13 percent of newspaper leadership. This means that the communities most reporters and editors come from do not look like the places where Black Lives Matter activists live. The press also has historically taken the side of police departments in coverage of crime—including cases in which an officer has been at fault. As Jelani Cobb wrote for this magazine, describing a white reporter in a predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhood, “What to the journalist seemed inscrutable was, to many residents, reasonable.” Many non-Black journalists’ first personal experience with American police violence came during the protests that erupted after Floyd’s death, when hundreds of reporters were arrested, shot with rubber bullets, or gassed with chemical agents.

It’s important to recognize that the demand to defund the police is about more than just policy; it’s the advent of a new kind of politics, one that breaks the narratives and tropes we have relied on in order to make sense of the country. The movement doesn’t work in the same way that journalism, as we know it, expects a movement to work. As reporters, we typically look for leaders to interview and for spokespeople who can explain a rally’s demands. But modern abolitionists tend to reject traditional organizing models; instead, they pursue collective, horizontal leadership structures. “We want to let the community lead itself, and we also know that the state surveils and targets leaders,” Sisay, who is part of Survived and Punished, told me. Like every other volunteer in the group, Sisay’s only title is “member.” “No one is trying to be a Martin or Malcolm,” she said.

The context of the 2020 campaigns has compounded the challenge to journalists. Other social movements, such as the Tea Party, have thrown their weight behind putting candidates in office, but most abolitionists describe elections as simply one potential—and decidedly limited—tool in pursuit of their goals. More than one abolitionist I spoke to described voting as merely “harm reduction.” Elections, they argued, infrequently offer solutions to institutional problems where the government itself is to blame. The race for the White House would seem particularly

removed from the organizing modern abolitionists do. “No matter who is president, there is still violence in our communities, and still violence in the prison-industrial complex,” Sisay said. And beyond strategy, there’s also a deep sense of disillusionment with a system of voting that continually fails Black people, even as they turn out at record levels. If the protesters in the streets don’t seem to be pursuing a strategy that prioritizes getting Biden elected president (and if defunding appears to be a “massive political mistake” for Democrats), it is because making Biden president is ultimately not abolitionists’ most pressing goal.

The rules of the institutions that non-Black journalists know—the schools, the government buildings, the campaign headquarters—don’t apply to the messy cacophony of a passionate protest movement. Anti-police advocates believe that it would be a mistake for political reporters not to understand the energy of this moment as revolutionary in nature. “People are so fed up after the failures of reform, they’ve embraced what abolitionists have been saying all along: that the systems of policing and imprisonment are, at their core, violent, racist institutions,” Mohamed Shehk, the national media and communications director for Critical Resistance, told me.

Then again, the nature of big ideas is that, eventually, they’ll be taken up by the masses. Even if it doesn’t happen this election cycle, it seems inevitable that politicians will soon pull “Defund the Police” into their campaign platforms. Shehk and others worry that, as their message becomes absorbed into the mainstream, it will be dislodged from its abolitionist roots and transfigured into a call for reform. The gravity of electoral politics is strong, and can be deadly. As time goes on, journalists will have to evaluate different policy proposals to defund the police—starting in Minneapolis, where it seems poised to become a reality. In June, a veto-proof majority of the city council announced their intent to disband the police department and to reinvest the resources into community infrastructure and nonviolent alternatives to policing. Jacob Frey, the mayor, said he was against the plan. He will be up for reelection next year. **CJR**

“This Is a Moment for Imagination”

Mychal Denzel Smith,
Josie Duffy Rice, and
Alex Vitale on the limits
and opportunities of
considering police abolition
in an election year.

T**HIS SPRING**, amid a global pandemic and an unprecedented presidential campaign season, a number of Black Americans—including Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd—lost their lives to police violence. In June, CJR convened three longtime writers and speakers on the subjects of anti-Black racism and policing to discuss the media conversation that has evolved in the wake of recent protests.

SMITH We're now a few weeks into sustained national protests against police brutality that erupted after the death of George Floyd, and all three of us have been appearing on air as a result of intense media attention on protesters' demands to defund the police or abolish the police. We've talked and written about these ideas before, and in this moment we've had an opportunity to speak to a number of different audiences. How are you two feeling about making the media rounds?

DUFFY RICE It feels overwhelming. For years I felt like I was Bible-thumping on the corner to an audience that didn't want to hear it. Or I was talking to the same people who already believed. So it's exciting to see more people grapple with these ideas.

VITALE Mostly it's exhausting. I've been working twelve-plus-hour days. But it also is an obligation. I feel that I need to use my position as an academic book writer to create as much public space for this movement as I can, in the arenas that I have access to. I'm trying to advance these ideas in ways that provide political space and resources intellectually and financially to folks on the ground.

SMITH In the conversations on police abolition that I've participated in with both of you in these past few weeks, I do feel like we've had space, but then what we say gets chopped up, decontextualized, and turned into sound bites. How do we push the conversation further when we know the media attention span is so short?

VITALE I've been actually blown away by the number of hour-long radio shows and podcasts and live events in which I've had



MYCHAL DENZEL SMITH is the author of *Invisible Man*, *Got the Whole World Watching* and the forthcoming *Stakes Is High*. He is a Fellow at Type Media Center.



JOSIE DUFFY RICE is the president of *The Appeal* and host of the podcast *Justice in America*. She is a New America Fellow, a Type Media Fellow, and a Civic Media Fellow at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Innovation Lab.



ALEX VITALE is a professor of sociology and coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College and a visiting professor at London South Bank University. He has spent the past thirty years writing about policing and consults with police departments and human rights organizations internationally. He is the author of *City of Disorder* and *The End of Policing*.

opportunities to explain these things in depth. But even having five to seven minutes on national television to lay out what this movement is about was something that I'd never experienced before, except in one case with *PBS NewsHour*. The time spent discussing police abolition by mainstream media sites like the *Washington Post* and *Time* magazine and CNN has really been remarkable. So at least in those first two weeks of the protests there was a real openness to hearing what this is about. I think we're in a slightly different moment now.

DUFFY RICE It's a moment for imagination, which has generally been scarce in talking about criminal justice. It's very hard for people who don't do this work every day to imagine a new world, so to see people engaging in that is major. The national conversation won't remain this focused forever, but I hope this moment will open the door to a new way of thinking. My grandma, for example, has been doing civil rights work for seventy years. A couple of weeks ago, police abolition was not even on her radar. Now you can see her looking at these ideas as if they're not so foreign. There's no going back to a world where people don't have this paradigm in their head.

SMITH At the same time, the context that's needed to have a difficult conversation is diminished because cable news outlets are committed to a certain style of television and presentation that's built around quick segments. The ideas get packaged and served to a majority-white audience in the form of a basic introduction rather than a complex argument. Is that the best way for people to understand these issues? What do you do when you're on television knowing that this is one of the few opportunities that you're going to get to advocate for the idea of abolishing the police or discuss it with any real knowledge?

VITALE All you can do in those moments is give the best, most concise argument you can for having these ideas be seriously considered, and attempt to lift up the folks who are doing the actual work on the ground. The only reason that this level of conversation is happening is because of the uprisings. Strategically my focus is on using my voice to

directly support those movements, because that's what's going to really create the political power necessary for change. Technocratic arguments and well-reasoned treatises are not enough.

DUFFY RICE Cable news is not constructed for new arguments. And it's hard to overestimate the importance of this year being an election year, and the fact that a lot of these people think that police abolition is a losing issue. We're always battling the court of public opinion, and good ideas that are new don't always poll super well. That's not a concern of mine, necessarily, but it is a concern of cable news networks.

VITALE This rejiggering of the cable TV narrative is definitely tied to the election. It's clear that CNN and MSNBC are in the Biden camp, and therefore they share a very narrow analysis of police reform. They don't want to do anything that is going to show up Biden or make Biden look inadequate. They're not interested in having many voices that are undermining Biden's pro-police message.

SMITH The ideas we're seeing around policing and abolition have been developing for a long time. We're hearing a lot from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for example, whose writing and organizing dates back decades. We are reaching a zenith for the movement in which Mariame Kaba can write an op-ed for the *New York Times* saying literally abolish the police—the product of so many decades of work—but certain journalists who are now just encountering the movement dismiss it out of hand as silly and unserious, in bad faith. Some writers are saying, “This is a dumb idea, I don't know where it came from, no one has explained it.” A few are fixating on polls showing that people don't support the idea of abolishing the police. Is this sort of dismissal worth addressing? Does the focus need to be less on those who aren't interested in taking the conversation seriously and more on media that is curious?

VITALE I'm not interested in debating Tucker Carlson. But I think there does need to be some pushback on the kind of Vox News centrism that relies on misrepresentations of these ideas and these movements.

“Abolishing slavery didn’t poll well.
Martin Luther King didn’t poll well.
The fact that it doesn’t poll well is
just not relevant.”

DUFFY RICE There is an overreliance on numbers in journalism. I don’t think poll numbers are totally irrelevant. I wouldn’t suggest right now, at this very moment, that Joe Biden make his entire platform about abolishing the police. I understand that there’s a utilitarian approach to winning a presidential election. But the thing is, poll numbers aren’t my job. I’m not a campaign manager. What I do, and what Alex does, is present ideas where we have expertise.

Everything I learned, I learned from Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis. These are the people who have taught me everything. And I didn’t start out in this field as a prison abolitionist or police abolitionist. Learning is a valuable skill that can help you change your mind. Abolishing slavery also didn’t poll well. Martin Luther King didn’t poll well. Historically, when we look back on things and think, “How could we have had that system?” the answer is that the majority of people supported that system. So the fact that it doesn’t poll well is just not relevant to my own approach to thinking about this work. We’re asking people to change their minds about a big idea. Sometimes that takes longer than three weeks.

Number-based critiques frustrate me because they are an illusion of information that isn’t reflective of actual truth. If the numbers say crime goes up, well, what crime are

we talking about? Who’s measuring it? Most crime isn’t even reported. The word *crime* itself is laden with assumptions and biases and misunderstandings. FBI statistics cannot describe what’s happening in a community or how people feel.

Trying to measure the worth of policies by determining that for every dollar of crime prevention we put in, we get \$1.63 of social benefits is an approach that will never accurately reflect the lived experiences of people. We have to interrogate really basic ideas about justice to even have a real conversation about police abolition, and I don’t think that interrogation is happening. Some reporters cite studies and say, “We’re just asking the real tough questions.” But they’re not. The real tough questions are the ones that don’t have an answer here, and that result in some uncertainty, and that make us question everything we think we know about crime and safety in America.

VITALE It’s not just a kind of willful ignorance or intellectual laziness. This is about a political-economic viewpoint that says that it’s not appropriate for us to have universal healthcare or adequate housing because that would require reining in the power of economic elites. It’s a defense of a rancid class war carried out in part by a reliance on policing.

“The harms the news talks about are framed as individual moral failure and inadequacy rather than structural failures.”

DUFFY RICE What we’re saying is that policing is part of a much bigger structure that relies on the control and the subjugation of Black people and poor people, and has for decades. What if we were to grapple with what it means to not rely on policing? I think that when this feels theoretical to you as a journalist, those conversations seem too big and too unnecessary and too leftist and too pie-in-the-sky. They’re not. They’re actually crucial for us to evolve as a country. This isn’t a thought exercise. I think it is lamentable to see laziness disguised as pragmatism in people who present themselves as thought leaders.

SMITH Let’s talk about America’s discourse about crime historically. Crime became central to politics in the sixties, as uprisings in urban areas reacted to a lack of jobs, to poverty, to police violence. Simultaneously the suburbs were built and became a destination for white flight. Consequently, white people feared violence encroaching upon their safety in their suburban enclaves. And so, during the Lyndon Johnson administration, the idea of an urgent need to eradicate crime was born. Richard Nixon took it to another level, and a number of big-city mayors came to power by committing to maintain law and order. That was translated again through Ronald Reagan and the war on drugs, and adopted by the Democratic Party. The idea of crime

and Black criminality was a bipartisan idea. So I say all that to ask, what gets lost when conversations about crime and policing get subsumed into electoral politics?

DUFFY RICE I think what you’re getting at is the social construction of crime and criminality and the fact that for decades politicians have been wielding this as a shortcut to an election win. And not just presidential candidates or congressional candidates—it’s every single level of government in almost every single position, including judges, city council, mayors, district attorneys, sheriffs, state legislators. We started seeing cops in schools around the time of *Brown v. Board*. We articulated the war on crime in the Johnson administration, around the time of the Civil Rights Act. So you can’t decouple racism from crime in this country’s history, and you certainly can’t separate partisanship from the conversation about crime.

But, look, fear is a very salient emotion. I recognize that as a parent. I spend half my time worried about something happening to my kid that statistically is just as likely as him getting abducted by aliens. When people feel like their safety might be at risk, it’s very difficult to have a reasonable conversation about statistics. That is one of the most uphill battles that we fight. But I do think that arming people with the truth is a helpful defense.

It's interesting to see people's reactions when you tell them crime is lower on average than it's been in fifty years. Maybe your car gets broken into, or maybe there's interpersonal conflict, but the random violence that we think of as crime is not happening at scale. People think crime is a solid category with solid numbers with solid indicators. It's not. That's scary for people in many ways, but it's also an opportunity to shift our electoral politics away from allowing elected officials to lock people up and to then say they did their jobs. What really keeps us safe? Is it the back end of policing, is it the back end of prisons, or is it making sure kids have good schools? Making sure they have parks? Making sure someone picks up the garbage? What is it that provides people with safety? In large part, it's dignity and opportunity, and if we don't provide those two things, then we're fighting a losing battle—the same one that politicians have said they're fighting for years.

VITALE It's important to emphasize that this is a public safety movement led by people who have experienced a profound lack of safety in their lives, and for whom policing has not been the solution. But there's a larger conversation that needs to be had about how we understand harm and risk. And the electronic media, both local and national, in the United States is funded by corporate advertising. It's important to them that harm and risk be conceptualized in a particular way that absolves corporate America of any responsibility for these problems. So if General Electric owns national media directly through purchase or indirectly through advertising, we're not going to hear much about how they're poisoning communities. Look at climate change and how poorly that's been covered—because it implicates the people who pay for the news to go on the air. That means that the harms that get talked about on the news are the harms that are framed as being the result of individual and group moral failure and inadequacy rather than structural failures of housing markets, labor markets, and healthcare markets. That has always been a major factor in the “it bleeds, it leads” approach of news programs. We need to lift up non-corporate-sponsored media so we have a chance to explain these ideas more fully.

SMITH What are the prospects of pushing the Democratic Party, and in particular Joe Biden, their selected standard-bearer and architect of the 1994 crime bill, to have a substantial conversation around defunding the police?

VITALE None. I'm very pessimistic about this. A month ago, no one I worked with thought that we would be in direct conversation with the Biden folks about discussing abolitionist frames for understanding the criminal justice system. I think our ability to make an impact on this national election is quite limited, and strategically I continue to put most of my effort into building local organizing.

DUFFY RICE I don't think any shift at all is impossible. Certainly I agree that come November, defunding the police is not going to be on the table. I also agree that that's not where defunding the police happens. National narratives do have salience, and it's critical that national politics at least be aware of the conversation. But policing, again, is local. Criminal justice is local. And what the community needs in West Virginia is not going to be what the community needs in Baltimore or Atlanta or Oakland. We're always trying to tell local stories on a national scale, but that can be difficult to do if you don't have a strong local journalism infrastructure, which obviously has been depleted over the past few years.

We need to build momentum locally, where it has already been building. I'm reminded of the \$15 minimum wage. When I graduated from law school, in 2013, a \$15 minimum wage was a crazy idea. Nobody was talking about it except some fringe labor activists. And then it got pickup in Seattle, in San Francisco, in New York. Suddenly it's a national movement. And here we are in 2020, when a \$15 minimum wage is a reasonable position for a Democratic politician to take and not be laughed offstage. These shifts are possible—I don't know if they're possible five months from now, but they're possible long term. We're seeing a chink in the armor of the culture of policing. People are starting—not enough people, not a majority—but some are starting to think that maybe police have too much power and they're not capable of maintaining it responsibly. There is potential. This is a groundswell movement. **CJR**



STREAMING

YouTube's Psychic Wounds



Seeking political news, **Nicholson Baker** ventures to the wrong clip and back again

There are times when I get in a YouTube mood and I lose a day, maybe two, watching video clips. Often this happens when I can't sleep. I turn my phone sideways and wander the vast metropolis of the uploaded, in search of novelty, history, laughter, minor disasters, kindness, instant karma, disarming animal faces, and reviews of fast lenses by Kaiman Wong. YouTube has shown me garrulous unboxing videos, baby elephants saved from drowning by their mothers and aunts, outtakes from old newsreels, and title sequences of seventies sitcoms. It has shown me John and Yoko on Dick Cavett, Mary McCarthy on Jack Paar, Arundhati Roy interviewed in a garden, and the trailer for the movie version of John Cheever's "The Swimmer." This one mega-monster-website has taught me how to refill power-steering fluid in a ten-year-old Honda Civic, how to program a Honeywell thermostat, and how to de-pixelate jaggy images in Photoshop. It's brought me evidence of the infinitude of unsung, uncredited human effort and experience. I've also watched the plucky Subway Rat haul a slice of pizza down stairs, and I've felt a kinship with him, or her.

YouTube, this endless, crowd-curated theater of ourselves, serves up the raw, the cooked, the failing, the heartrending, the shocking, the helpful, and the WTF? any time you want it. So a few months ago, when the *Columbia Journalism Review* asked me to watch YouTube videos for a little while, as an experiment, to see what news of the world was served up by its freshly tuned algorithm, I of course said yes.

And then I made a mistake. Using YouTube's own search bar, I looked up some terms that I thought I should know more about before beginning: "deep state," for instance. Soon I was blitzed and blistered by a series of bizarre insanities that I vaguely knew existed within cultish communities of confused truthers, but which I had never been exposed to firsthand. I was offered a gigantic YouTube playlist called "Political"—494 videos gathered by someone named kitsaplady, who is apparently from Kitsap, Washington—about an elite global network of pedophiles, Satan worshippers, and 9/11 plotters. "What we're going to be talking about today is pure evil," says an interviewer, speaking to a man in a blue button-down shirt. The button-down-shirt man contends that three women—Hillary Clinton, Janet Reno, and "my sister Marcy"—control the biggest pedophilia network in the world. "God asked me to expose evil," he says.

I went on to watch more videos in the playlist, many of them about Cathy O'Brien, who in the nineties cowrote a book called *Trance*

YouTube, this endless, crowd-curated theater of ourselves, serves up the raw, the cooked, the failing, the helpful, and the WTF? any time you want it.

about her years as a CIA-programmed sex slave for world leaders; she claimed that she'd been abused by George H.W. Bush, Gerald Ford, Senator Robert Byrd, Pierre Trudeau, and Hillary Clinton. (Not by Bill Clinton, though; according to O'Brien, Bill tended more toward the homosexual end of the spectrum.) An excerpt from one of O'Brien's talks was posted to YouTube on October 15, 2016, weeks away from the presidential election. It was entitled "Cathy O'Brien: Hillary Clinton Raped Me."

"I'm going to do something I've never done before," says Glenn Canady, the man who posted the Cathy O'Brien clip. "I'm going to put out a cash reward, five hundred dollars, to whoever contacts Alex Jones." If enough people alert Jones, and he does a story on Cathy O'Brien, it will get Donald Trump elected, Canady claims. "We've got the sworn testimony of Cathy O'Brien on video all over YouTube—you can type in 'Hillary Clinton Cathy O'Brien,'" he continues. "Find those videos." Then he announces that he's going to sweeten the pot. "If you're the person who does this,

who puts out Cathy O'Brien, and it gets picked up by Drudge afterwards, I'm going to give you a thousand dollars. That's how important it is. Because, guys, what good does this money do me if we're all dead, if Hillary Clinton gets elected? Because she's going to come for our guns. You do not have a weapon like Cathy O'Brien and not use it. You have to use every weapon in your arsenal."

Jones, on *Infowars*, his enormously popular and (self-admittedly) psychotic show, did, in fact, the very next day in October, run something about Hillary Clinton and sexual abuse. Pizzagate—the ridiculous, now exhaustively debunked story of Clinton, a child sex ring, and a pizzeria in Washington, DC—ensued a few weeks later. In the summer and fall of 2016, YouTube was clearly a platform for election-swaying mental confusion and meme manipulation.

But that was not all I found in the long playlist from kitsaplady. I watched a former CIA officer and United States Marine named Robert David Steele, now an anti-Zionist Trump booster, talk authoritatively into his

The more dark, wiggy videos you consume, the darker and wiggier your playlist becomes.

camera about “adrenochrome” in June 2017. Steele says:

The Republican Party has historically been the party that is most connected to Wall Street, the Illuminati, and the Satanists that used pedophilia as well as—this is a very delicate topic. It turns out that drinking children’s blood is an anti-aging device. This is just really sick and disgusting, but it’s a fact, it’s a chemical fact. If you drink adrenalized children’s blood, which is to say you terrorize the child—not just with sodomy but with torture and other satanic ritual things—if you adrenalize the child’s blood before you kill them and drink their blood, this is a doubly effective anti-aging device. You can also harvest children’s bone marrow.

I hit the space bar, pausing the video. “Wow,” a commenter had posted. “This guy is sick and delusional. He needs medication.” No more, I thought; I can’t write about YouTube after all. In search of alternative political opinions, I’d entered a world of deranged cranks saying awful things. A YouTube that

offers videos about satanic pedophilia networks is not the YouTube I knew and, in my innocence, loved. It’s all over. I’m done.

When I first started watching YouTube—in 2006, just before it was bought by Google—it was a fairly intimate place. Renetto (a/k/a Paul Robinett) made a clip with “EXTREME GRAPHIC CONTENT,” in which he chewed a mouthful of Mentos and drank Diet Coke and feigned a gastric explosion. Suddenly he was famous. Boh3m3 (a/k/a Ben Going), a voluble young man with an appealingly crooked smile, was one of the first to reach ten thousand subscribers; he shaved his head for the camcorder and made funny sounds with compressed air. Janemcwhir (a/k/a Jane), a Canadian teenager with a pierced lower lip, talked about her friends’ phobias and celebrated her mild crush on a fellow video-uploader named lightrayface. In one of Jane’s videos from the time, “Sneeze,” she suddenly sneezes. Nothing had ever existed like this. Everyone was talking to everyone

else about their lives. We had all become diarists. It was tremendously new and fun and confessional: first-person journalism.

Now YouTube is a million times bigger—an indispensable, life-enhancing tool, and also a source of poisonous neo-medieval yammering. There's much more to sift through, good and evil. We're told that after the 2016 elections Google made adjustments to YouTube's recommendation algorithm, so as not to lead impressionable gun-owning zealots frictionlessly down tunnels of paranoia. No one outside of Google knows exactly what the algorithmic changes were—those are proprietary—but we do know that some objectionable videos were removed and that others were affixed with “information cues,” as Susan Wojcicki, YouTube's CEO, has called them. Little boxes began to appear below certain postings, with links to relevant articles on Wikipedia, in a feeble attempt to redirect viewers of extreme misinformation—stories claiming that high school shootings are hoaxes, that the moon landing was staged, that lizard-brained blood-drinking space creatures are taking over the world, etc. Things got a bit better.

But a vast amount of incendiary fantasy was still there to be streamed. “Some bad actors are exploiting our openness to mislead, manipulate, harass, and even harm,” Wojcicki wrote on YouTube's blog in December 2017. She announced that the company had invested in phalanxes of human content reviewers, along with “powerful new machine learning technology to scale the efforts of our human moderators to take down videos and comments that violate our policies.” Those efforts, however, could not forestall tragedy in February 2018, when a man and an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle killed or injured thirty-four people at a high school in Parkland, Florida. Afterward, one of the surviving students, David Hogg, found himself accused on YouTube of being an actor hired by advocates of gun control; conspiracy videos about him rose high on YouTube's trending list. That summer Alex Jones, who'd raved that Hogg wanted “billions of people to die,” was banned from YouTube, and in January 2019 the company made yet more modifications to its autoplay offerings.

Even so, it remains true today that the more dark, wiggly videos you consume, the darker and wiggier your playlist becomes,

until you inhabit a so-called “filter bubble,” while Google makes ad money off of your addictive radicalization. (See Zeynep Tufekci, in the *New York Times*: “Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.” And Kevin Roose's extraordinary front-page *Times* article “The Making of a YouTube Radical.”) A recent analysis of YouTube's recommendation engine (“A Longitudinal Analysis of YouTube's Promotion of Conspiracy Videos”), from the University of California, Berkeley's School of Information, concludes that the filter-bubble effect declined somewhat following the algorithmic adjustments of 2019 but that now, a year later, “the proportion of conspiratorial recommendations has steadily rebounded.” The authors are troubled by “the ever-growing weaponization of YouTube to spread disinformation and partisan content around the world.” Remember: unlike most news outlets, YouTube is free and open to all contributors—free to watch as much as you want, and free to load up with hours of homegrown creepy content. Anyone with a computer and a quiet space in which to harangue followers can become a David Icke protégé, broadcasting fanaticisms about pedophile reptilian international bankers.

It was the blood-drinking delusion in particular that made me never want to watch a YouTube clip again. I told my editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review* that I was sorry but I couldn't write the piece. She countered by asking me if I could simply think about what it was that I'd liked about YouTube in the first place. Try a new search, she suggested. Ignore the psychotic Satan-fearing fantasies—which have, after all, been written about by many competent journalists, who've been doing their best to make sense of recent political calamities. Find out instead what today's monetized algorithm actually gives you. This was good advice. Maybe, I thought, I could even use YouTube to heal the fresh psychic wounds of YouTube.

So I tried again. I used a brand-new account, made with a new email address, so that my previous viewing history wouldn't influence which videos were recommended, in case the algorithm wanted to mine my past clicks. To begin, I seeded the

feed with one of my favorite clips, “cockatoo loves elvis,” by Mark Muldoon. In his kitchen, Muldoon sings to a pair of white cockatoos, one of whom is a music lover and promptly fans out his or her head-feathers, then bobs enthusiastically. The other bird, not sharing the mood, sidesteps quietly to the farthest edge of the perch, leaning away, sometimes lifting a claw in warning: I don’t want this right now. “Sometimes you’re the parrot on the left,” says a commenter named stwawbewwy. “Sometimes you’re the parrot on the right.”

YouTube suggested some places for me to go next, one of which was a cat compilation called “FUN CHALLENGE: Try not to laugh—The FUNNIEST cat videos EVER.” A cat fiercely attacks a mailman’s gloved hand through a letter slot, shoving several pieces of correspondence back out onto the porch steps. I laughed; my life had improved. Then I watched “Funniest Pet Reactions & Bloopers of November 2017,” which had some good moments and, honestly, some less good moments. “A camel drinking out of a can,” writes commenter Louise, “disgusting, height of cruelty, treat them with love and respect. Don’t get me started about the elephant on the bike.”

Then, for its own proprietary reasons, the algorithm offered me a playlist called “clean vines for the children of Jesus.” I clicked on it. It was a series of ultra-short videos that had

lived on Vine, the now defunct short-video sharing platform. Someone screams the names of batteries phonetically: “AA! AAA! AAAA!” A little kid, happily eating an ice cream pop, says, “My daddy has a gold tooth.” Her friend says, “My dad has diabetes.”

I went back to my home screen, where the breaking news of the day, displayed as a row of smaller video thumbnails, was “Biden Talks ‘Presidential Leadership’ in Time of Coronavirus.” Biden says, “Just over a week ago, many of the pundits declared that this candidacy was dead. Now we’re very much alive.” A crowd cheers.

Then something oddly political happened. The next video that the algorithm gave me was a three-year-old monologue by Judge Jeanine Pirro, on Fox News, about why Hillary Clinton used a private email account for her government correspondence. Before it played, an ad came on from the Trump campaign, wanting me to take a survey. Then I got a second ad, for a newspaper with ultra-conservative and Falun Gong connections called the *Epoch Times*: “Are you tired of the media spinning the truth and pushing false narratives?” Evidently YouTube, not knowing much about me yet, wrongly assumed that I was a member of the alt-right. Based on what? Where I live, in Maine, or that I like dancing-cockatoo videos? That I like Elvis? Maybe it was Elvis.

YouTube’s Playbook

By Mathew Ingram

In February, a blog post appeared on YouTube’s website. The company had updated its election-related policies, it said; content would be removed if it had been “technically manipulated or doctored in a way that misleads users and may pose a serious risk of egregious harm.” The same would go for anything that “aims to mislead people about voting or the census processes, like telling viewers an incorrect voting date.” Nor could users post videos that advanced false claims about eligibility requirements for candidates.

To explain how this would work, Ivy Choi, a YouTube spokesperson, cited

a clip that went viral last year, depicting Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, slowed down so that she appeared to slur her words. Under the new rules, Choi said, that video would have been banished. But another clip—of Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, responding to a voter in New Hampshire—was trimmed to suggest (wrongly) that he had made racist remarks, and that one would be allowed to stay. The problem wasn’t a matter of editing, Choi explained, but of context.

Having faced criticism for allowing itself to be weaponized by alt-right

Judge Jeanine's monologue was bitter and unpleasant. "Bill and Hillary Clinton are the Bonnie and Clyde of American politics," she says. I clicked the "next" arrow. Now I was given fourteen minutes of Hillary Clinton testifying about Benghazi from 2015. Why?

Returning to the home screen, I mulled over the options there. Should I watch something about a ninety-three-year-old man talking to a judge about his speeding ticket, or an anthology of TV news bloopers, or an arm-wrestling match between a professional wrestler and a little girl named Brielle? Should I watch top basketball dunks, or a comedy bit by Bill Engvall on bathroom etiquette for married people, or Seth Rogen testifying before Congress? Or Ellen DeGeneres's favorite "What's Wrong" photos, or a clip of Simon Cowell judging singers on *America's Got Talent*?

I chose Ellen, who showed her studio audience a Craigslist photo of an apartment: off to one side someone's bare-but-blurred bottom is partly visible. "You know what they say," Ellen tells the crowd. "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen and take all your clothes off." Then I clicked on *America's Got Talent*. Onstage, a girl named Ansley, perhaps ten years old, begins singing an Aretha Franklin song. She's good. Cowell stops her and says her background track is horrible. The girl looks downcast. Simon suggests that

she sing the song a cappella, no backing track; to fortify her, he offers her some fresh water from an *America's Got Talent* Dunkin' Donuts cup. Ansley resumes singing. Her voice fills the huge auditorium they're in, as her family looks on anxiously and the crowd claps her a rhythm. "*You better think, think about what you're trying to do to me,*" she sings. Simon gives her a thumbs-up. Great.

Next, "Best TV News Bloopers of the Decade." I clicked and was happy: a weatherman announced that there would be "areas of drist and mizzle." I then remembered how much I used to love fast-worker compilations: clips of nimble people who can manipulate bricks or packing tape or burritos with amazing speed and precision. There's the one-armed pizza twirler. The blind barber, who cuts by feel. The floor refinisher with his sweeping arcs of polyurethane. The dance of the window washer at the airport. The bare-chested Ferris wheel attendant who hurls the entire wheel forward, seat by seat. I watched these for an hour. So much strength, so much skill: thanks to YouTube, millions of people see anonymous hands doing what we'd thought were impossible things—newsworthy things.

I searched for Lionel Messi, recalling that several years ago I spent a whole morning watching heroic soccer plays. I don't know much about soccer, and yet I cheered at

trolls, YouTube has also taken steps to block troublesome accounts. For instance, Alex Jones, of *Infowars*, was banned in 2018. YouTube has tweaked its recommendation algorithm, to promote what it calls "authoritative" news sources. And, Google says, it has a threat analysis group, which embeds security engineers in every part of the company to ferret out Russian-style influence campaigns. According to the *New York Times*, these staffers conduct "red-team" drills to practice responding to election-meddling scenarios and give daily briefings to executives on emerging hazards.

Will that be sufficient to confront whatever comes next? In March, CNET reported on a sophisticated network of more than twenty YouTube channels spreading pro-Trump disinformation of various kinds everywhere from Vietnam to Bosnia. The scheme appeared to be a play for advertising revenue, by using the network to exploit Americans' desire for partisan political videos. According to the CNET report, Google said that its threat analysis group "saw no evidence the channels were part of a foreign political influence operation." The Trump stuff was merely incidental. (Google

removed the channels upon seeing CNET's report.)

The videos that CNET flagged weren't so impressive—they all used basic scripts read by a computerized voice, with poor grammar and low-level clip art. But in each one, the pitch of the voice and the graphics had been altered slightly: tiny differences apparently designed to circumvent YouTube's automated filters. You don't need a political motive to wreak havoc on an election. And it will take a lot more effort from Google to confront the chaos that can be set off on YouTube.

Messi's thrilling goals and passes and feints. "20 Lionel Messi Dribbles That Shocked the World." "10 Impossible Goals Scored By Lionel Messi That Cristiano Ronaldo Will Never Ever Score." Then I remembered other lost hours, times I'd watched Russian dashboard camera videos that capture (usually) minor accidents, often in slushy snowstorms: "Best of Russian Driving Fails 2018," with ten million views. When I searched for them, the YouTube algorithm obligingly followed up with an assemblage of Parkour Fails, in which people flip and fly through windows onto roofs, and fall and skid and survive.

Parkouring from video to video, I began to feel the basic incredulous YouTube feeling, which is this: How can so much leaping life and vitality and energy and tragedy and determination and crazy risk-taking be pouring out of one laptop screen? How can it be available any time I want it? Bodybuilders who push themselves too far and tear their steroid-injected biceps. Pole-vaulters who break their poles and yet go on to set world records. Construction workers on handmade scaffolding who pass bowls of cement by hand to colleagues a level above them. Public freak-outs, dozens of them, in parking lots and liquor stores and fast-food restaurants. Epic scenes of road rage, where people curse and finger-jab through a car window. Thieves subdued by store owners wielding empty cash register drawers. Chiropractors audibly jerking people's heads around: "14 Minutes of Quality Cracks." (After every crack, the patient makes a little sigh of contentment.) Public freestyle twerkers with flowery yoga pants and fifty-one million views. Celebrity TV interviews. "I'm on a drug, it's called Charlie Sheen," says Charlie Sheen, in a clip from *Good Morning America*. "It's not available, because if you try it once you will die. Your face will melt off and your children will weep over your exploded body." And then there are the thousands of self-help videos. A whole playlist discusses the latest version of the eighteenth-century French adage that the best is the enemy of the good. Now it goes, "Perfect is the Enemy of Done." Which is so true.

I felt my mind expanding with the limitlessness of what has been achieved and will never be known by any single person, but is nonetheless worth knowing. The endless library of

the speaking human face, and the explaining human voice. The ranting, cajoling, contending, confessing, storytelling voice. YouTube inhales five hundred hours' worth of potentially watchable, listenable material per minute, which is more than seven hundred thousand hours coming in every day. Very little of it, relatively speaking, is about politicians who allegedly feed on human blood to stay young and control the world.

When I'm in a drunk-on-YouTube mood, it's astonishing to me to think that Netflix can exist, that HBO can exist, that Spotify can exist, that books can exist, that public radio and podcasts can exist. Why read a magazine when you can watch heavy-equipment-fail videos? Cranes teeter and topple and huge logging machines get mired in mud, and it all happens very slowly, at dream-time speed, and nobody is injured (for the most part). Watch a few "wild weather" and "severe weather" compilations and ask yourself if you're the same afterward. In "15 Scariest Natural Phenomena Recorded on Camera," typhoons and tidal waves silently ruin communities while people film from balconies and a royalty-free composer named Kevin MacLeod plays sad sounds on the piano.

By now my feed was richer, influenced by what I'd seen and what YouTube's "deep neural network," its engine of eternal surprise, figured I would like to see next. It was giving me master bricklayers, outrageous game show moments, cockatoos swearing, "The Gruesome Case of the Papin Sisters," and, sometimes, left-leaning clips. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Best Moments Supercut" was in my playlist now, even though I had never searched for AOC. There were also many clips from Fox News, including a blast of opinion from Laura Ingraham, who says that the Democrats are turning the coronavirus into a political crisis. Ingraham plays a sound bite from Rep. Maxine Waters, who expresses the view that the president is a liar who needs to be quiet—that he needs to "shut his mouth." "Isn't Maxine nice," Ingraham says, showing her lower teeth.

YouTube was also suggesting more news bloopers—it could tell how much I liked them, even though I hardly ever clicked on them

now—plus some *Saturday Night Live* bits. Then I was given an outdoor piano player performing “Dance Monkey” on his upright piano on a city street. That piano video, which had eighteen million views, led me to the official “Dance Monkey” video, by a performer who goes by Tones and I, with three-quarters of a billion views. Tones is an Australian woman with a throaty, reggae-like voice, although in the video she’s dressed up as a bearded geezer who wanders around on a golf course blowing golf balls into holes with a leaf blower. After an ad for car insurance—in which a cool man in a leather jacket repeatedly tries and fails to say “Liberty Mutual customizes your car insurance, so you only pay for what you need”—YouTube played a *New York Times* making-of video about Tones in her early days as a busker, and how she became a massive hit. “People don’t walk past Tones,” her manager says. “No one does.” When Tones first played “Dance Monkey” for him, he remembers thinking, “This is going to be a cracker—like, a proper cracker.” By the time the *Times* video played the footage of Tones singing “Dance Monkey” at an outdoor concert, I was shaking my head, spluttering with admiration. I felt in the know, even though I was really a year behind.

This is why I love YouTube, despite its documented dark corners, its co-option by opinion hackers and election influencers to trick people into believing in globalist conspiracies of Very Evil People. If you want to spelunk in slippery cave systems of irrationality, YouTube will definitely take you there. For example, on April 1, 2020, Steele, the “adrenochrome” man, posted one of several of his coronavirus conspiracy videos: he now claimed that New York City, a “province of Israel” (or so he said in the comments), had lied about the number of COVID-19 deaths as part of a “massive medical simulation.” (Steele’s video was removed a month later.) But if you want to feel how great it is to be alive in this scrambled and feverish moment in history, if you want to know that you’re part of something huge and unstoppable and planetary and singular and unpredictable, something that can fill you with joy and make you want to toss pieces of paper in the air, YouTube will do that for you, too.

Now please excuse me while I watch this cockatoo freak-out compilation. **CJR**



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Sabrina Siddiqui

Wall Street Journal

The coronavirus pandemic is a campaign issue. The US-China relationship, which is now under renewed scrutiny because of the pandemic, is a campaign issue. How the pandemic is affecting the economy, people’s livelihoods, the healthcare system, education—all of that is a campaign issue. And so you can connect those stories back to the campaign, now that we have a two-man race. What President Trump is doing compared with what Vice President Biden suggests that he would do instead.



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How Univision has guided Latinos through a historic election cycle

EN ESPAÑOL

The Essentials

AUTHOR

Stephania Taladrid

ILLUSTRATOR

Edmon de Haro

O

n Friday the thirteenth of March, Lourdes Torres, the senior vice president of political coverage at Univision News, traveled from Miami to Washington, DC. Her team was to cohost, along with CNN, the first virtual presidential debate in United States history. Nearly two thousand Americans had already tested positive for the novel coronavirus; more than forty had died. In a matter of days, the debate's organizers had decided to move the event from a large theater in downtown Phoenix to a television studio in the nation's capital. There would be no crowd in the room—no raucous cheers or applause, no in-person audience questions. The two Democratic candidates, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, would have to stand six feet from each other. The moderators would need to account for the public's sense of fear and doubt over the spread of COVID-19. This was to be a defining event in the election, and a test with no precedent for everyone involved. "I left Miami that day feeling as if a hurricane was coming our way," Torres said.

Florida was still weeks from a lockdown, but people were beginning to worry about stocking up their pantries and filling up their gas tanks. Having worked at Univision for nearly three decades, Torres soon realized that COVID-19 would be the single most disruptive story of her career. Fifty-nine and born in Cuba, with shoulder-length auburn hair and a slight gap between her front teeth, she is a behind-the-camera person, but the decisions she makes on set are always

visible. Her staff looks to her for everything from story planning to conflict resolution. “When you’re dealing with an emergency situation such as this one, you’re not thinking about strategizing or about what needs to be done the following month,” Torres said. “You basically go into survival mode.”

The week before the debate, Jorge Ramos, Univision’s biggest star, had to drop out as host—he was worried he’d been exposed to someone with COVID-19—and Ilia Calderón, another anchor at the network, took his place. Univision banned all nonessential travel; in order to fly to Washington, Torres had to request a waiver from her supervisor for herself and four others—a small delegation compared to the multitude who awaited them at CNN. When she got in a taxi at Reagan National Airport, she asked her driver how he was coping with the crisis. He replied by saying she was his first customer in four hours. “My mind was set on figuring out how to reflect that kind of hardship during the debate,” Torres told me. “And the conversations we were having with the team were all about translating those experiences into questions for the candidates.”

Once they arrived, Torres and Calderón hunkered down to prepare with their staff. Typically, debate hosts have several weeks or more to familiarize themselves with the material they will be covering. In this case, Calderón, who is forty-eight, had only a few days. Univision’s team compiled research on each candidate’s proposals for healthcare, the economy, immigration, and US foreign policy on Latin America. Long hours were spent at CNN’s office, where Calderón joined Jake Tapper and Dana Bash for mock debates. “Our priority was to bring up Latinos to the table,” Calderón said. She wanted to ensure that the candidates would address the needs of America’s eleven million undocumented workers—many of whom were deemed essential but continued to live in fear of deportation—and of all Latinos who have felt targeted by President Trump’s derision. She wanted to remind everyone in the room that Latinos could be pivotal to the 2020 election.

By the time the event was held, that Sunday night, Biden and Sanders were moving their campaigns entirely to digital. *El debate democrata* began with the two men walking into an empty CNN studio and exchanging an awkward elbow bump. “Welcome to this unique event,” Tapper said. The three hosts sat straight backed, their hands resting on a high acrylic table. When Tapper introduced Calderón, who wore a V-necked pink dress, her eyes darted left and right; she flashed a bashful smile.

Calderón asked Biden and Sanders to explain how they would handle the economic ravages of the pandemic—a matter of urgent concern for the 84 percent of Latinos who are unable to work from home. The median household income of Hispanics is three-quarters that of whites; after Native Americans, they are the most likely of any group in the country to lack health insurance. Calderón pressed the candidates to speak about comprehensive immigration reform, deportation raids, and sanctuary cities. Each man offered a pitch to Latino viewers. “Look, we are a nation of immigrants—our future rests upon the Latino community being fully integrated,” Biden said. “Twenty-four of every one hundred children in school today, from kindergarten through high school, is a Latino. Right now. Today. The idea that any

American thinks it doesn’t pay for us to significantly invest in their future is absolutely a bizarre notion.”

In hindsight, Torres wishes the debate had been held a month later. By then, statistics made it evident that the virus disproportionately affected Latinos, who, because of their low incomes and immigration statuses, were all the more vulnerable. Within weeks, news surfaced of workers dying at meat-processing plants; millions of business owners grappling with bankruptcy; and many more losing their jobs. “The coronavirus has exposed the cracks in society,” Torres said. “These cracks are never the focus of debates—they’re certainly not discussed as bluntly and openly as they are now.” Torres had wanted the debate to reveal that the political interests of Latinos are inextricably linked to those of the entire American population. The question afterward, as the campaigns became overshadowed by the coronavirus, was how Univision could keep Latinos in focus.

“People depend on us,” Ramos, who is sixty-two, told me recently from his office, in Miami. “Univision is a lifeline to survive in the United States, and our audiences expect us to do much more than just deliver the news.” The notion of a television network being a lifeline may seem an exaggeration, but in polls, Latinos have consistently ranked Univision as one of the most trusted institutions in the United States, second only to the Catholic Church. Its coverage, entirely in Spanish, reaches the homes of people who speak it as a first language. During its prime-time news hours, Univision has an audience of nearly two million.

Univision grew from the first Hispanic TV channel in the US, which went live in San Antonio in the summer of 1955. In the early sixties, a group of businessmen, including Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, a Mexican communications tycoon, bought the channel and some others to create the Spanish International Network, now known as Univision. Among the group’s purchases was KMEX-TV, a station based in Los Angeles, where Ramos—freshly arrived from Mexico City—began working as a reporter in the mid-eighties. KMEX, he realized, was not a typical newsroom. It hosted health and employment fairs for its audiences

She wanted to remind everyone in the room that Latinos could be pivotal to the 2020 election.

and offered advice on the best schools for Hispanic youth. The mission was not only to inform, but also to empower and serve Latinos—a mandate that Univision eventually made its own.

Since then, the Hispanic community in the United States has quadrupled in size, comprising some sixty million people. This year, for the first time, Latinos are the country's largest minority voting group. Many of them see Ramos and his colleagues as the best large-scale advocates they have, and Univision as their main access point to politics. "There is an absolute leadership vacuum at the national level," Torres told me. When Julián Castro dropped out of the 2020 presidential race, in January, he delivered a blunt message: "It simply isn't our time." Congress now has the largest class of Latinos in history—totaling thirty-eight—but there are only four Latino members of the Senate. Ramos, the elder statesman of the Latino media elite, outranks them all.

Over the decades, if it's been covered at all, the Latino demographic has typically been cast in the press as a "sleeping giant"—a term meant to evoke its tremendous, yet dormant, potential. "For a long time, everyone expected the sleeping giant to wake up, without anyone setting the alarm," Stephanie Valencia, a cofounder of a research group called Equis Labs, told me. Many Latinos felt disengaged from the political process because no one was speaking directly to them. News outlets repeated the failures of candidates, who for decades saw the Latino electorate as a monolith. It didn't matter whether

politicians or journalists were addressing Mexicans, Central Americans, Puerto Ricans, or Dominicans—their message remained the same. And, for the most part, it centered on immigration. As a corollary, Latino turnout has lagged compared to that of other voting groups. In 2008, the last time the country saw an economic crisis comparable to today's, participation rates among Latinos were dismal. In 2016, less than half of eligible Latino voters cast their ballots.

Only recently have campaign strategists begun to tap into Latino voters' yearning to be part of the political process. And Univision has been uniquely positioned to cover the community's political rise. During the 2016 election cycle, Ramos made headlines for being ousted from a press conference at which he grilled Trump about the wall and deportations. Ramos has been similarly tough on Democrats. "Would you take responsibility for the three million people that were deported during the Obama-Biden administration?" he asked Biden in February.

“Many people are expecting you to apologize for that—to say that it was wrong.”

“I think it was a big mistake,” Biden responded. “It took too long to get it right.”

Biden, for lack of money or will, largely failed to engage with Latinos in the primaries. He lost to Sanders among these voters in all states with a sizable Hispanic population except Florida. Now that Biden is the presumptive Democratic nominee, it’s unclear whether his campaign can win over the demographic in time for November. Laura Jiménez, Biden’s Latino-engagement director, told me recently that it was crucial for the campaign to “meet people where they are,” but she wouldn’t offer any specifics on the budget allocated for doing so, the plan she would follow, or even the lessons she had learned from the primaries. Events continue to be online only.

Univision sees its responsibility to educate Latino voters—to be “the bridge between candidates and voters,” as Ramos told me. But ultimately, a news channel—no matter how much trust it has earned from its audience—cannot compensate for the work of campaigns. “You can give people the information they need to go out and vote, but they will need to have an incentive to do so,” Torres said. “That is where politicians have to come in and take Latinos seriously. Latinos will listen. They will know who is doing the work that needs to be done—and who isn’t.”

Like many other outlets, Univision had to frantically adapt its coverage to the fast-evolving nature of the pandemic. Although the network started reporting on the coronavirus from the time it surfaced, in Wuhan, China, anchors weren’t prepared to grant it their full attention until the crisis overwhelmed the United States.

Enrique Acevedo, forty-two and the anchor of Univision’s nightly news show, was the first among the staff to ring the alarm. Early this year, he’d attended the World Economic Forum, where he met Chinese leaders, including Hong Kong’s chief executive, who warned him and others of the imminent risk of COVID-19. Acevedo had covered the 2009 H1N1 pandemic in Mexico, where he’d witnessed the deadly effects of swine flu. The dispatches from his Chinese colleagues sounded frighteningly familiar. “I came back from Davos in mid-January and told my team that we needed to be speaking much more about the topic,” he said. “I remember their response being, ‘But why? We already put out two stories last week!’” He kept insisting. In early February, he reached out to Daniel Coronell, Univision News’s president, urging him to allocate resources to the network’s COVID-19 response, including gear to protect employees. Acevedo asked about a contingency plan, in case the staff became infected. What would happen if the anchors fell ill? Where would they record daily news shows? His alarm went unheeded.

Then March rolled around. The number of COVID-19 cases in the US rose significantly; many of Acevedo’s colleagues realized that the pandemic wasn’t as distant as they had thought. “One week we had a normal news show focused on politics, the economy, immigration, and all the other topics,” Calderón said. “And all of a sudden, we were plunged in a show where all that mattered was to inform people about what was happening around the coronavirus.” Most staffers

in Univision’s news department were sent home. Only those deemed essential—roughly 10 percent of all five hundred employees—were required to work from the studio, in Miami. Among them were engineers, sound technicians, and camera operators, whose labor was needed to keep the control room running. Everyone entering the studio was required to fill out a medical questionnaire before setting foot inside. A cleaning crew was on call; phones were sanitized constantly. All meetings, including twice-daily editorial check-ins, took place over the phone, and became subject to awkward silences, frozen images, and cumbersome exchanges.

In late March, two employees tested positive for COVID-19. Univision temporarily closed its studio, and the evening news team had to record from a parking lot. Under a blazing sun, production hands set up folding tables, teleprompters, light stands, and cameras to film the program outside. The building was later sanitized, and no additional cases surfaced, but Univision continued taking precautions. Any journalists still leaving the house to cover the pandemic were required to wear N95 masks and gloves; they also carried long sticks for their microphones and kept a safe distance from people they interviewed. Those reporting from home set up makeshift studios, with the occasional intrusion of a child or pet. From one day to the next, on-air personalities turned into amateur makeup artists and hairstylists. The audience seemed to enjoy peeking into the homes of their favorite anchors, but producers had to cope with not being able to fix the lighting and frame the shots as they once did. “We have little control over the quality of our productions,” Torres said.

By then, Univision had realized that its viewers were seeking even more information about the pandemic. Coronell and María Antonieta Collins, another veteran Univision anchor, decided to put together a new show in the 3pm slot—*The Coronavirus Diary*—which would be cohosted by Ramos and aired live on Univision and on Facebook. When the show started, Ramos was still in quarantine, so he joined the broadcast via Skype while Collins took the lead from the studio. Dr. Juan Rivera, Univision’s chief medical correspondent, called in to answer questions



BEHIND THE SCENES

Lourdes Torres speaks with Joe Biden pre-quarantine.

from the audience: *Is it safe to treat COVID-19 symptoms with ibuprofen? Why is hydroxy-chloroquine in short supply? Does remdesivir really work?* The program delved into practical concerns, including when to expect stimulus checks and whether undocumented workers qualified for federal aid. Ramos and Collins also showcased stories of Latinos on the front lines—a Puerto Rican nurse spoke about conditions at the intensive-care unit of her hospital, in the Bronx; Collins wore a face shield made by a Colombian businessman who had repurposed his printing company. *The Coronavirus Diary* reached as many as 15.9 million viewers. Soon, Ramos returned to the studio, and the two anchors began presenting the news sitting six feet apart.

The show's second episode coincided with the March 17 Democratic primaries, which took place in Florida, Arizona, and Illinois. President Trump had just released his "Fifteen days to slow the spread" guidelines, and recommended avoiding gatherings of more than ten people, yet only Ohio

decided to alter its original plans. Univision needed to find a way to cover the health story alongside the election news. A correspondent in Chicago said that, at the polling station where she was, only half the people who would typically have cast their ballots showed up. In Florida, Univision reported that election authorities expected just 20 percent of registered voters in Miami-Dade County—where a large majority of residents are Latino—to appear at the polls. That prediction had been made before COVID-19 upended everything; now Latino turnout in Miami-Dade looked even bleaker. Ramos was troubled. "I hope that Latinos won't make the same mistake they did in 2016," he told me. "We just don't know how the pandemic will affect voter participation."

During the pandemic, Univision's ratings have skyrocketed. But to keep the numbers high, its leaders will need to strike the right balance between a crisis with no foreseeable end and an election scheduled for the fall. "No topic can be dissociated from the

pandemic at the moment,” Torres told me. “That applies to any topic you may be covering—including politics.” Daniel Morcate, Univision’s chief newsroom editor, agreed, but he wasn’t sure how political stories would play with viewers. He felt an obligation to cover the campaigns, yet he knew that Latinos were relying on Univision to help them survive the coming months. “I worry about what we can do to keep the topic of the election alive, given how important it is for the country, and for Hispanics in particular,” he told me. “I think that is our biggest challenge.”

In mid-May, Torres sat on the balcony of her apartment in Doral, just inland of Miami, and waited for her colleagues to join her via Webex. She was hosting a virtual meeting with Univision’s art department to review the motion graphics they will use on election night. Rosa Mosqueira, the only person calling from the studio, was in the control room; her role was to pull up the options and move the camera around to see the set from different angles.

The designers had been working on the graphics for more than two months. Mosqueira showed the group an image of Trump taking 57.5 percent of the vote in North Carolina, Biden 42.5 percent. It was adorned with blue stripes and “2020” in the background. A debate ensued. “I don’t know if I like the stripes clumped up,” an art director said. “Maybe some of those blue lines should be dimmed down a little.” Someone spoke over him, in disagreement. They went in circles, voices crossing helplessly in the video chat. Torres cut in, asking for someone in the studio to stand onstage, so they could all see how the graphic looked. “Maybe the final solution is a combination of both ideas? I don’t know,” Mosqueira said.

After everyone had their say, Torres ruled, asking for one more revision. “It’s like a puzzle,” she told me after the call. Normally, they would all have been together in the control room; it would have been easier to make changes on the spot. The only upside of working remotely was that everyone was seeing the set from a small screen, as their audiences do. Still, Torres was hoping to delay her return to the office as much as possible. She recently recovered from gastrointestinal cancer, she explained, and her doctors had advised her to stay home as long as she could.

Until things got back to normal, she needed to figure out how to reintegrate campaign news into Univision’s coverage. In conversations with senior producers and representatives of the network’s local stations, not everyone agreed. “We all share a sense of responsibility over keeping our viewers informed on the coronavirus, but that also applies to other topics,” Torres said. “There are those who think we



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Jonathan Oosting

Bridge magazine, Michigan

Michigan was the last real primary state before the lockdown happened. The state confirmed its first case on March 10, the same night as the primary, about an hour after the polls closed. So I went from covering a Biden rally in Detroit on March 9 to covering the primary election on March 10 to covering the pandemic the night of March 10.

I wrote probably one story in two months that wasn’t about the pandemic or the political reaction. In Michigan, we’ve had a big political fight between Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the legislature over how much power she has to continue issuing executive orders and taking emergency actions. At the very beginning, I felt almost dirty writing about politics in the middle of a global pandemic. It felt a little distasteful. But it’s hard to ignore the politics at this point.

I think the pandemic and the election have kind of become the same story. Folks who have strong opinions about the governor’s response to the coronavirus also have very strong feelings about the president’s response. They’re all wrapped up together.

should continue to focus on the pandemic; others, like myself, believe it's important to cover more political news."

The responsibility to which Torres alluded came with a high level of scrutiny. After George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, was killed under the knee of a white officer, Univision (and its competitor, Telemundo) were accused of dedicating too much airtime to the looting and property damage that emerged from protests across the country; instead, critics said, the focus should have been on police brutality. "Hispanic media like Univision & Telemundo are so selective on what's broadcasted in regards to the protests and riots going on knowing that where the majority of our Latin/Hispanic parents depend on 4 info," a viewer wrote on Twitter. Some argued that Univision was falling into racial prejudices against Black people that pervade the Latino community. They called for broader representation of Afro-Latinos in the newsroom and held Hispanic outlets accountable for their power to sway public opinion. The controversy, which was largely stirred by young voices, made it clear that Univision had yet to figure out how to engage those viewers—many of whom get their news online and have a preference for English. "Our audiences are much more fractured now and shared with many more outlets," Torres told me. Univision had spent heavily on its website and on its social media presence; the importance of that demographic was understood, at least. "Young Latinos are the lifeblood of our community," she said. "These are the ones that will help their parents exercise their right to vote."

In the immediate term, Univision was aiming to bring together voters and candidates through virtual town halls. In May, Torres joined the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in arranging a conversation with Biden, members of Congress, activists, and the sons and daughters of Latino workers at meat plants. The event, held on Zoom and moderated by Acevedo, focused on how to protect essential workers. "They designate them as essential workers, then treat them as disposable," Biden said. Domingo García, the national president of LULAC, reminded the audience that five thousand workers at meat plants had tested positive for COVID-19 and twenty had died; until a few weeks before the

town hall, employees were handling food without face masks. Relatives of these workers said that many in their families had caught the disease. Each panelist addressed the imperative to protect workers in the short term, to ensure that none lacked necessary protective gear, that none would be deported. As for the long term, some argued, the fate of essential workers would be determined on Election Day, and only Biden could upend the status quo. But he had yet to successfully make that case for himself, Torres observed. "A lot will depend on what Biden does, on whether he prioritizes engaging with Latinos," she told me. (In June, Acevedo left Univision.)

Torres is still grappling with how to cover Trump. Univision initially aired his coronavirus briefings live but later decided to simply have anchors report on them. "It's a very difficult predicament," Torres said, "because we need to be constantly balancing people's right to have full access to these briefings while also being mindful of what other outlets are doing." Reporting on Republican candidates had grown increasingly difficult since 2012, when the party's position on immigration hardened, Torres explained. "They didn't want to answer our questions, because they knew we would get right at the topic." In 2016, she said, Trump only exacerbated the problem. "It became toxic for candidates to be associated with Latinos." Three months ago, she reached out to the White House, asking for a prerecorded clip of the president to include in a special episode on the coronavirus. She has yet to hear back.

"There are too many unknowns about the election for us to know exactly how we'll cover it," Torres said. "But our sense of mission has become all the stronger because we are one of the few resources a lot of people in our community have. And they can trust we'll be there for them every day." In the coming months, Torres will have to determine how to cover primaries that have been postponed and whether party conventions have become obsolete. She'll come out of her seventh presidential election with Univision having learned how a political contest unfolds in the midst of a pandemic. She hopes that she will have elevated the profile of Latinos in the eyes of the campaigns. The stakes are higher than ever. Thirty-two million Latinos are eligible to vote this year. If they show up, their influence could be decisive. **CJR**



A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a man in a blue suit and a light blue face mask sitting in a wooden chair. He is looking down at a smartphone in his hands. Behind him are tall wooden bookshelves filled with many books. The floor is covered with a blue carpet. The lighting is soft, and the overall tone is somewhat somber.

At work in an election season
marked by a pandemic and an
anti-racist uprising.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Outside In

A

decade ago, when someone else was president of the United States, when there was no COVID-19, when George Floyd was alive, the writer Rebecca Solnit gave an interview to *The Believer* magazine. It was not a presidential election year. “We tend to think of politics as a tiny fenced-off arena of unpleasantness, which most Americans avoid—except for the horse race of a primary season or fun moral questions often centered in irrelevant individual crimes and acts,” she said. “But politics is pervasive. Everything is political and the choice to be ‘apolitical’ is usually just an endorsement of the status quo and the unexamined life.”

When we look around now, it’s impossible not to see politics everywhere. Campaign politics swerve into public health politics; racial politics underlie everything. Journalists have sometimes pictured themselves standing outside of it all, pencils up, observing the news as it flashes by. But coverage is political, too—and to say otherwise is a failure to appreciate the nature of the work. That has always been so. But now more than ever—given the confluence of events in the spring of 2020—it is a reality that is impossible to deny. —*Betsy Morais*



New Normal

◀◀ In March, before a press briefing, a White House doctor takes journalists' temperatures.

✔ In May, Sen. Charles Schumer talks to mask-clad reporters at the Capitol. They try to keep their distance.





Leadership Test

⚡ In April, following a meeting of the coronavirus task force, President Trump addresses reporters in the briefing room.



» In March, aiming to clinch the Democratic Party's nomination for president, Joe Biden appears in his first virtual town hall. Held over Zoom and Facebook Live, the event is plagued by technical difficulty. At one point, Biden wanders off-screen.

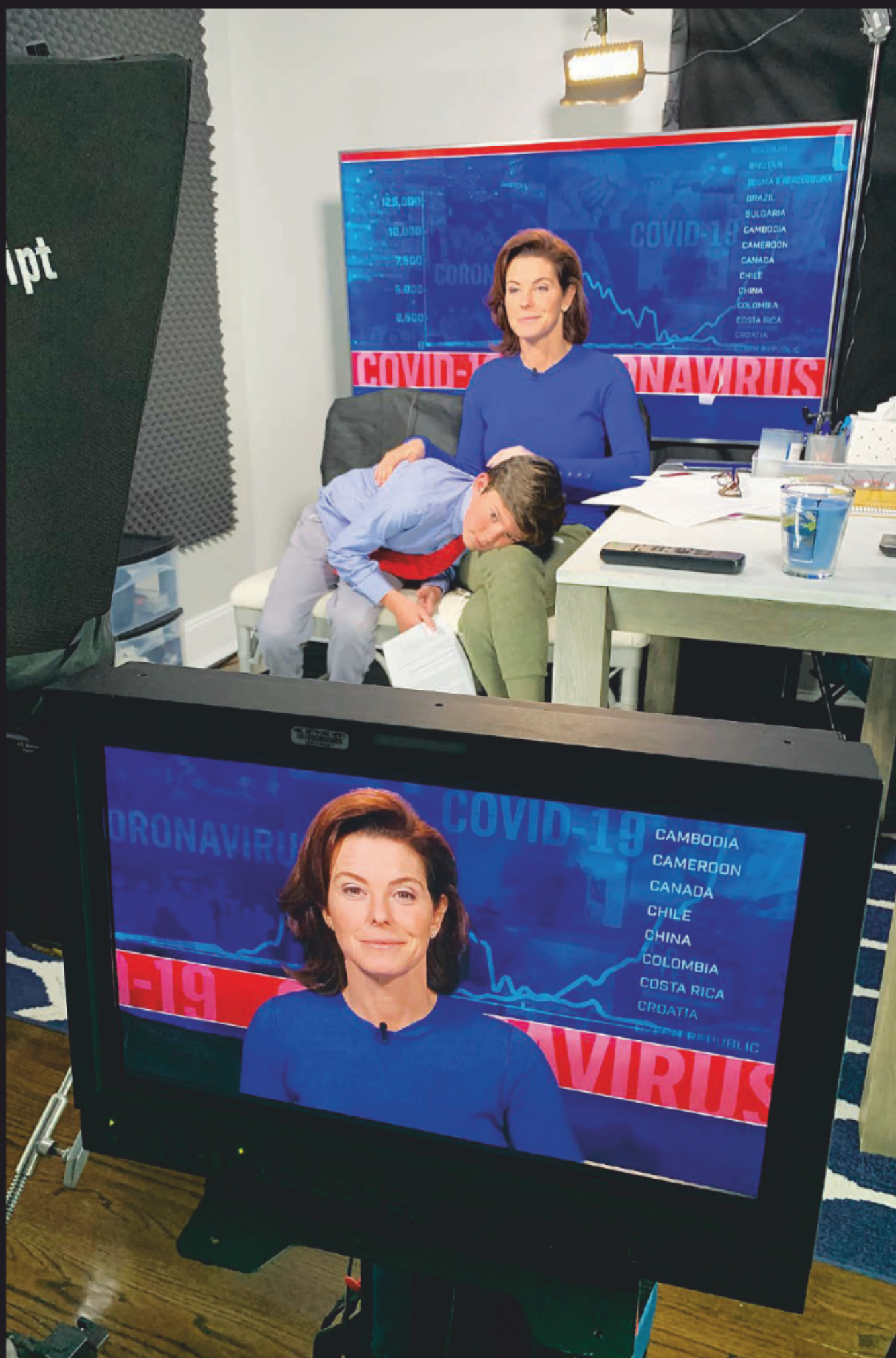


Speaking Remotely

✔ Candace Valenzuela, a Democratic congressional candidate from the suburbs of Dallas, calls in from the makeshift campaign office in her bathroom while caring for her two young sons.



« While working from home, Stephanie Ruhle, an MSNBC anchor and senior business correspondent for NBC News, delivers a live report with her eleven-year-old son hidden just off camera.



Part of the Story

✔ While reporting from Minneapolis—where protests have broken out over the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer—Omar Jimenez, a CNN correspondent, is arrested live on air.





⤴ In May, while covering demonstrations near the Colorado statehouse, Hyoung Chang, a photographer for the *Denver Post*, is struck by a police projectile; his badge is damaged.



How Joanne McNeil copes with the inundation of news online

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Lurker

AUTHOR

Alexandria Neason

ILLUSTRATOR

Daniel Zender

On Super Tuesday, when a slate of Democratic candidates were vying for their party's presidential nomination, Joanne McNeil was in the apartment she sublets in West Harlem, on the fifth floor of a prewar walk-up. The place was in the middle of a renovation; the living room had been emptied of furniture, and the floors, still unfinished, were covered in a thin layer of dust. Slabs of wood lay idle against the walls and tucked into corners. But the kitchen was untouched, so she settled in there. The cabinets were seafoam green; leafy plants, hanging in pots by a window, clamored for sun. McNeil began her day by preparing a bowl of hot oatmeal, sitting down at her table, opening her laptop, and turning on *The Daily*, the podcast hosted by Michael Barbaro, of the *New York Times*.

That day's episode was, of course, about the presidential election. Barbaro interviewed Brian Keane, a fifty-two-year-old from Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC. Focused on the mind of a suburban voter, the episode began with a producer researching the cost of houses in Keane's neighborhood. The first home was a colonial with four bedrooms and three bathrooms, priced at \$1.3 million. "I think it's safe to say well off," Barbaro said. "An affluent suburban community." McNeil looked up from her laptop and scoffed.

"Really? You picked a white man in Northern Virginia?" she said. She rolled her eyes. "There's still such an accommodation to *New York Times* readers who are very wealthy."

For those of us who are people of the internet, the natural impulse might have then been to tweet—to take this tiny outrage and air it in the digital public square. Social media has made press critics of us all.

But McNeil was on her laptop. And she doesn't use Twitter when she's on her laptop. Ever.

McNeil, who turns forty this month, is tall, with a long chin and straight brown hair. She wore a gray sweater with rainbow stripes and black jeans. She had a contemplative look. It's not that she has a desire to be disengaged from the world and its problems. But she does want to remain disengaged from the frenzy surrounding the news—the chatter; the impulsive, unhelpful reactions. She controls her access to news and information by lurking, as she calls it, which is also the title of her debut book, published in February. *Lurking* is a history of the internet and how it turned people into “users.”

Lurking, as McNeil practices it, follows a defined set of rules. First: confine Twitter access to your cellphone. She buries the app in a folder to allow for distance, to force herself to notice when she's opening it. Twitter doesn't deserve that much prominence, she says.

Second: When on Twitter, don't mindlessly scroll through your never-ending timeline, clicking on and replying to everything that piques the slightest interest. Be selective about whose tweets you read. Directly visit the profiles of individuals you trust—you don't even need a Twitter account to do this on public pages. “I don't mean lurking as an act of reconnaissance, eavesdropping, or something sneaky,” she writes in the introduction to her book. “Lurking can be a waiting room before communication, in brief delay like the brutal clang of an old dial-up modem sound, a moment to pause and prepare oneself for an exchange with others, to get one's feet wet before plunging into the network and its encasement and amplification of identity.”

Third: compartmentalize *everything*. Instead of subjecting herself to the tyranny of a timeline full of links and anxieties from the thousand-plus accounts she follows on Twitter, McNeil has curated a series of private lists from a selection of accounts—some she follows, some she technically does not. It's through these lists that she receives a filtered version of the Twitterverse, less boundless echo chamber than local library. She has a list for technology, one for politics, and one for the book world. She has a list called the “catbox” that includes people whose opinions she holds in contempt. (“It's like the garbage,” she told me.) There's also a list of accounts she isn't sure belong to real people. By making these lists, she finds she's able to sort out the substance from the vapidness and to contextualize breaking news with informed opinions. “Twitter lists are one of the best functionalities,” she said. “It's funny, because I'm legit lurking on them—that is my most regular lurking experience. I don't follow all of them. They have no idea.”

McNeil has other ways of organizing her internet intake, too. On her laptop, she uses Chrome tabs to check her email and visit the homepages of news sites like the *Times*. Links to stories she finds on Twitter also get opened in tabs. Newsletters don't; she reads most of those using an app called Stoop, which routes newsletters onto its platform so that they skip your email inbox. “I feel more in control,” McNeil said. For entertainment—Hulu, Netflix, and a recent notable addition, cable news—she uses Safari. She listens to podcasts using the Overcast app. *On Point*, a collaboration between Boston's WBUR and NPR, is her favorite. “I try to make sure that the things I look at on the Web are extremely engaging,” she said. “It's a struggle to make sure I'm focused.”

And then there is a fourth rule, which helps her observe all the others: going offline, even briefly, is the key to her philosophy. At times, McNeil takes breaks from Twitter, deleting the app for a weekend when she feels it's interfering with her life. There's just too much to process, and she's experienced this since at least the dawn of cable news, as she's found the cycle of political coverage, in particular, to be loud, incessant, and prolonged. On phones, breaking-news alerts light up our screens in unison, a silent symphony of panic and alarm; we're compelled to aggressively refresh our Twitter timelines. Readers can't look away, even when doing so is the only thing that will make us feel sane. The internet, McNeil believes, has flattened everything, at once offering new levels of accessibility and muddling the complicated realities of the physical world. The way platforms like Twitter are designed, she worries, they're bound to make us lose sight of ourselves, as we scroll endlessly through the intangible. Recently, she's become one of a growing number of thinkers who are suggesting ways, and granting permission, to responsibly step back. If that sounds apathetic, you're wrong. I spent a day with McNeil, reading virtually no news. And yet the news was all we talked about.

A few blocks away from McNeil's apartment, at a little café called Double Dutch Espresso, she ordered a hot coffee, black, and sat at a tiny table near the back. She pulled out her iPhone and, for the first time that day, opened the Twitter app. It was after 11am. “This feels like a quiet news day because people don't want to push out stories they've been working on for three months on a day when everyone's attention is elsewhere,” she said. She opened her laptop, a silver MacBook Air. The desktop was arranged neatly, its little blue folders all in a row. She saw me notice this, but didn't want me to get the wrong impression. “I'm a person who pushes everything under the bed, so it's still a mess,” she said.

McNeil was born in Brockton, Massachusetts, a small city outside of Boston. As a pre-teen, she walked from driveway to driveway, delivering copies of *The Enterprise*, Brockton's daily newspaper, for a few dollars per week. (In bad weather, her mom drove her, idling at the curb while she tossed the paper onto each

Readers can't look away, even when doing so is the only thing that will make us feel sane.

doorstep.) In the afternoon, she often made trips to the local Barnes & Noble, where she'd pick up the latest *Spin* and *Seventeen* magazines. In the evening, she'd settle in with her own copy of the newspaper, flipping through the news and arts sections.

In the mid-nineties, when McNeil was about fourteen, her father brought home the family's first computer. It was boxy. She'd heard of AOL, but unlimited browsing was a luxury of the future. The McNeil family paid for dial-up hours monthly, and overages cost extra. "I sometimes would get in trouble because the bills would come in and my dad would be like, 'Joanne, *what* are you doing on the computer?' One time it was one hundred dollars and my dad was so mad." In those days, the internet was made up primarily of static portals, message boards, and chat rooms designed, at AOL's behest, by media outlets. "I would wander around channels for politics," she said, "but it was all adults."

In 1998, McNeil graduated from high school and headed to George Mason University, in Northern Virginia, where she majored in economics. The internet had by then become more sophisticated; her class was the first at the school to have dorms outfitted with Ethernet.

McNeil could now access the Web as much as she wanted: for email, academic research, and Napster. "Finding music was the carrot," she said. "It was interesting to discover things this way. I was like, 'Oh, I get it now. Someone has these files saved to their computer, and this computer is talking to this computer, and all these people are on campus.'"

After college, McNeil worked a series of secretarial temp jobs, struggling to find her footing in a profession. She began writing fiction and, in 2008, started a blog called *The Tomorrow Museum*, where she mused on how technology was influencing the arts. She spent a lot of her spare time on Twitter, which soon became her primary social outlet; most of her friends, McNeil told me, are people she met online. When she felt ready, she would go to "Tweetups," where relationships formed on the internet were established in real life. Her experience differed from the descriptions of social media she read about in magazines. "Literary outlets would be critical of the idea of the internet in the first place," she recalled. "You'd see stories in *The Atlantic* about 'Is the internet making us lonely?' or 'Why is everyone on Twitter talking about what they had for breakfast?' If it was a cultural story, it was

always complaining.” She began to consider herself a tech person as well as a writer.

McNeil now contributes a column to *Filmmaker* magazine and dabbles in sci-fi. (A recent short story, “After the Eclipse on Paragon Hill,” is about the mass recall of “foreign memories” among a group of coworkers after an eclipse interferes with implants that control their minds.) She’s also a teacher. At the School for Poetic Computation, a hybrid school and artist residency, she has a writing class for students who are mostly tech workers. Soon, they’ll publish a tech criticism zine called *First Pancake*.

At the café, in a few keystrokes, McNeil logged in to Pinboard, a site that calls itself “social bookmarking for introverts.” Pinboard’s homepage looks like something straight out of the nineties: pared down, mostly white space with small black type. Here, McNeil stores links to news stories that she wants to remember later, along with reviews of her book and research materials for future projects. Pinboard also lets her browse what other people have deemed worthy of saving. There were, of course, countless stories about the day’s primaries. But McNeil wasn’t interested in reading them—not yet, at least.

She continued scrolling, pausing at a *Forbes* link, her cursor hovering. She sipped from her coffee. She clicked, and the URL took her to a story about self-driving cars, which may be the focus of her next book. She skimmed it, highlighting a portion of text, which she saved to her Pinboard account. Then she opened a new tab and typed in the URL for Archive Today, a service that preserves webpages. “It’s a blog,” she explained, “and sometimes they get taken down.” Archiving is important to a lurker; you may need to set an article aside for a day, or a week; only then will you know how valuable it really is, in the long term.

McNeil got up to go to the bathroom. Alone for a moment, I pulled my phone out to sneak a look. The screen was littered with news alerts. Anxiety pulled at my chest.

For as long as human beings have shared information, we have been stressed by it. Our modern sense of overwhelm—alternately blamed on current events, the amorphous “media” that reports

on them, and the technology that delivers the news—comes with immense precedent. Serial news reports, as we now think of them, began to circulate in Western Europe in the seventeenth century. Information once reserved for elites—kings, warriors, priests—became more widely available, from more sources, than ever before; news arrived as often as every day. Readers had to start adapting to the heightened pace of the news and learn how to assess it for credibility and bias.

The first local news infrastructures in North America emerged mainly in the form of hyperpartisan newspapers and pamphlets passed around among colonists. The articles brimmed with conspiracy. Even as news circulated within the continent, it still took at least a month for information to sail across the Atlantic, which left European settlers in America feeling nervously out of the loop about the goings-on back home. “I think it had to do with the nature of communications, where you have long silences and then you have these information dumps, when all of a sudden you get six weeks of newspapers and magazines all at once,” Helena Yoo Roth, a historian working on a doctorate in revolutionary America at the City University of New York, told me.

By the 1760s, however, more outlets were entering circulation, delivering serial publications across the British Empire. It began to feel as though “the ocean had disappeared,” Roth said, which shifted people’s anxiety in a new direction. “There was a constant overwhelming of sheer volume, what to them seemed like an *insane* volume of information, without the ability to differentiate for quality or authenticity.” The result was political upheaval. “It turned out learning more about each other might not have been necessarily a good thing, in the sense that, in shared ignorance, both sides of the Atlantic could continue on imagining and assuming things that weren’t true about the other that made the empire work.” Awareness turned adversarial. So on came the American Revolution, with a frenzy of news and misinformation darting across the ocean.

In the mid-1800s, Samuel Morse’s telegraph introduced instant communication, what we might call the early spine of breaking news. Journalism was again transformed. Information seemed to be coming at us at



VERY ONLINE

Joanne McNeil, like all of us, sometimes needs to log off.

greater and greater speed, from more directions, disrupting our flow of thought. In 1903, Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, observed as much in an influential essay called “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” writing that “stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention, present themselves from all sides.” The cycle of technological evolution paired with heightened anxiety continued for generations. In 1964, Bertram Gross, an American social scientist, coined the term “information overload” in *The Managing of Organizations*, a book on administration theory. Alvin Toffler, a social scientist and magazine writer, popularized the concept in his 1970 book *Future Shock*, applying it to the way human beings struggle to understand things when we’re inundated by an overwhelming amount of data. In an era of personal computing, Toffler warned, that could lead to our ruin.

“People have complained about information overload in different ways back through history,” James Gleick—the author of *The Information* (2011), which traces the development of communication from African talking drums to Wikipedia—told me recently. “We think information is what makes the world run,” he said. “On the other hand, we’re terrified by it, because we’re aware of information overload and all the concomitant sicknesses that go with it. How can it be that something

that we need so much of can give us the sensation of drowning?”

The more information we come across, Gleick continued, the more we seek ways to categorize it, as McNeil does with her Twitter lists. “A kind of anxiety comes with *that*,” he said. “You immediately want to know: What am I missing? How can I organize all the information I’m getting?” He drew a comparison between the abundance of news and a field of flowers. “When, suddenly, books or scientific journals bring you knowledge and drawings of other types of flowers you have never seen before, you have new issues,” he said. “You have to figure out how to name, classify them. Now new types of science books are designed to create taxonomies of flora. This is all aimed at providing organization for information that didn’t used to need it, because there wasn’t that much of it. Which is, of course, exactly what Google was when it arrived.”

If Google’s aim was to provide a taxonomy of news blossoms, it hasn’t quite succeeded. The internet is a vast field full of nasty weeds; it requires pruning. McNeil draws a comparison that is characteristically literary. “There is a trope in science fiction stories that telepathy burdens people with too much knowledge,” she writes in her book. “If you could read people’s minds, it would be unpleasant to have all that noise in your head.”

As advances in technology have transformed how we receive information, people have tried in different ways to manage their exposure. Some have attempted to shut themselves off from the news entirely. When Henry David Thoreau camped out at Walden “to live deliberately,” he argued against reading newspapers. “I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper,” he wrote. “If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another.” International news can also be dismissed, Thoreau went on, since “nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts.”

Since then, many others have withdrawn from society (with more commitment than Thoreau), flocking to communes and farms and monasteries, away from the world and all its bad news, in an attempt to create utopias or, at least, something less chaotic than reality. The internet, too, was once believed to be such a place; it was “never peaceful, never fair, never good, but early on it was benign, and use of it was more imaginative, less common, and less obligatory,” McNeil writes. As the internet grew, however, a few started to notice its dark potential. And by the 2010s, people increasingly began looking for ways to unplug from the Web, seeking some peace.

In 2016, Andrew Sullivan wrote in *New York* magazine of the myriad ways smartphones and frenetic blogging culture had both given him a career and broken his spirit. Over time, the boundary between the real and virtual worlds has disappeared, he argued, and there’s no simple means of escape from online oblivion: “When provided a constant source of information and news and gossip about each other—routed through our social networks—we are close to helpless.” He decided to stay off the internet, learn how to meditate, and, after months of preparation, attend a retreat where phones weren’t allowed. “Soon enough,” he wrote, “the world of ‘the news,’ and the raging primary campaign, disappeared from my consciousness.” In 2018, Farhad Manjoo, an opinion columnist for the *Times*, set out to restrict his news intake

to a small number of print outlets. He also vowed to unplug from Twitter and turn off his phone’s news notifications. He wound up with some blind spots (and didn’t totally live up to his goal), but he managed to read a half dozen books and see headlines in print that had been buried on Twitter. “Now I am not just less anxious and less addicted to the news, I am more widely informed,” Manjoo wrote in an essay detailing the experience.

There is no consensus on whether relieving ourselves from the toxicity of social media requires us to stop using it. Cal Newport, a computer scientist at Georgetown University and the author of *Digital Minimalism* (2019), argues that a full and permanent abandonment of our phones and social media apps probably isn’t necessary. Still, it’s important to be aware of our compulsions. When Newport solicited volunteers to quit most of their apps, as an experiment, one woman reported that, in the first week, she began picking up her phone repeatedly to check the weather.

Of course, not all news alerts are received by everyone the same way. For some, scrolling is not merely a bad habit; it can be an exercise in trauma. Black people know this all too well: the weight of years’ worth of news reports and videos depicting the extrajudicial murders of people with dark skin cannot simply be shaken away by logging off. Nobody gets a break from being Black. On the flip side, marginalized communities can particularly benefit from social media—by sharing news on their own terms and finding comfort in common responses.

Another recent book, *How to Do Nothing* (2019), is part manifesto, part instruction manual. Written by Jenny Odell, an artist and instructor at Stanford University, it acknowledges that attempting to escape from media-induced madness is complicated. “All too often, things like digital detox retreats are marketed as a kind of ‘life hack’ for increasing productivity upon our return to work,” Odell writes. “And the impulse to say goodbye to it all, *permanently*, doesn’t just neglect our responsibility to the world that we live in; it is largely unfeasible.” Odell felt a need for change in her digital-media habits after the 2016 election cycle. “I was seeing that the means by which we give over our hours and days are the same with which we assault

Make space not just for the headlines as they appear on our screens, but for what underlies breaking news.

ourselves with information and misinformation, at a frankly inhumane rate,” she writes. “Obviously the solution is not to stop reading the news, or even what other people have to say about the news, but we could use a moment to examine the relationship between attention span and the speed of information exchange.” The aim, in her view, should be to make space not just for headlines as they appear on our screens but for what underlies breaking news: racial, economic, and environmental injustice; the human condition.

Jaron Lanier, who helped create virtual reality and later became one of the Web’s most compelling critics, warns that the biggest concern is not information overload, but how bad actors use information platforms. “The problem is the calculation of media, whether it’s news or not, to manipulate people in a way that makes them cranky and scared and irritable and angry,” he told me recently. “Never, never rely on Google or Facebook for your news, because the algorithm that feeds you things is inevitably influenced by paid advertisers who are only paying out of the belief that it will influence you,” he said. “And then there are the interlopers, like armies of fake users and bots that are trying to sway the algorithms.”

In *Lurking*, McNeil charts how the internet changed as it grew: in 1994, there were just 2,738 websites; by 1998, when Google launched, there were well over 2 million. At that point, she writes, the internet stopped being a place and became “a someone.” That was reflected in the media, too, which reported not just on what informed people said in interviews, but also on the collective voices of the internet “as if they were the opinions of an individual person.”

McNeil likens the shift in our experience of the Web to that of a crowded elevator. “People blamed one another for their discomfort, instead of the elevator itself or proprietors who insisted it was safe,” she writes. Technology journalists tended to frame their stories in these terms, asking whether the internet was good or bad, smart or dumb, rather than focusing attention on its powerful architects. “According to the broader media narratives, it was up to us, the users, to shape our own experiences online, even when the choice to opt out became itself a fantasy.” (And even when reporters covered the phenomenon of news fatigue, they still continued to publish, serving up more fodder for the algorithms.)



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Allen Devlin

WYFF News 4, South Carolina

We're staying away from the on-camera, sit-down interview, which is our bread and butter. You go somewhere, meet someone, talk to them, put a camera on a tripod, put a microphone on, and go. That's your bite. That's your quote. We're not doing that nearly as much. A lot of people just aren't willing—they're not comfortable doing a face-to-face interview.

Interviews are now on FaceTime and Skype. I had to learn how to work Zoom for the first time. On air, it's always been that you go to the campaign rally, you show everybody: *This is what we're looking at. Look at these guys hyped up with the campaign signs. Here's the long election line, here's this person's speech, here's this town hall.* We don't just tell, we show the election—but we can no longer show because there's nothing to show.

I'm seeing that local GOP and Democrat groups are frustrated. No matter what decision is made on voting in person or absentee, both parties believe that their candidate, either Joe Biden or Donald Trump, is going to be affected negatively. People say, "If we do online or absentee only, then my candidate's gonna get less votes."

It's easy to understand how McNeil might miss the chat rooms of her youth, intimate and strange. It isn't nostalgia, exactly—the internet, as she says, was never pristine—but a desire for something earnest that's beyond the grip of tech companies. "What I am actually experiencing is a longing for an internet that is better, for internet communities that haven't come into being yet—certainly not on a mass scale," she writes. She likes Wikipedia, but even that has its flaws—for one, it presents itself as neutral, but it's not; for another, there are so many would-be entries that are overlooked, and important lines stricken from the record. She finds it hard to imagine collective input working the same way for journalism. What digital media needs, McNeil argues, is the "labor of mediation." Which is to say: judgment, accountability, editing.

In the weeks after Super Tuesday, McNeil's world had changed radically. A new virus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2, had ravaged China, then spread across Asia and Europe; now it had arrived in the United States. What had been a remote problem of faraway people was suddenly an American crisis, as hundreds began to die from COVID-19. That number would quickly reach the tens of thousands. Mayors and governors sent out alerts to their constituents with response plans that became more drastic by the minute. In New York, McNeil read that she should avoid the subway, then groups; soon, she was advised to stay home indefinitely. Hospitals were overrun, jobs lost. For weeks, journalists had bombarded the public with information about the Democratic primary. But now the winner of Super Tuesday—Joe Biden—felt beside the point. Overnight, the coronavirus had commanded the attention of people who could hardly believe they had any left.

I called McNeil. Originally, I'd thought we'd talk about the election results and what she'd read about them. I had wondered how Biden's win was playing among the inhabitants of McNeil's curated Twitter lists. I was curious about what political knowledge lurking had delivered since we last spoke. But almost as soon as we started talking, it became clear that the ticktock of the election

was far from our minds. And, in a break from habit, McNeil was not relying on Twitter and podcasts for news. “The place I’ve been getting the most updates from is a friend of mine who is a nurse,” she said. “She added me to this group DM where we’re constantly sharing stories and updates. I’d say the group is one-quarter healthcare professionals and everyone has some sort of background in left politics. Having that has been amazing. I check it all day long.”

The group chat, which comprised about fifty people, included links to news stories and dispatches from the hospitals and clinics where its members worked. When McNeil had medical questions after reading an article that confused her, she posed them to the group; since it was a closed conversation, everyone felt free to speak and to admit uncertainty. “It’s kind of how message boards would have been in the nineties and early aughts,” she told me. “People on message boards would trade links, and with no sense of ‘I’m going to go viral.’ It was, ‘Here is my community, and I’m going to share information with you.’ The good things about the internet are coming through these group chats.”

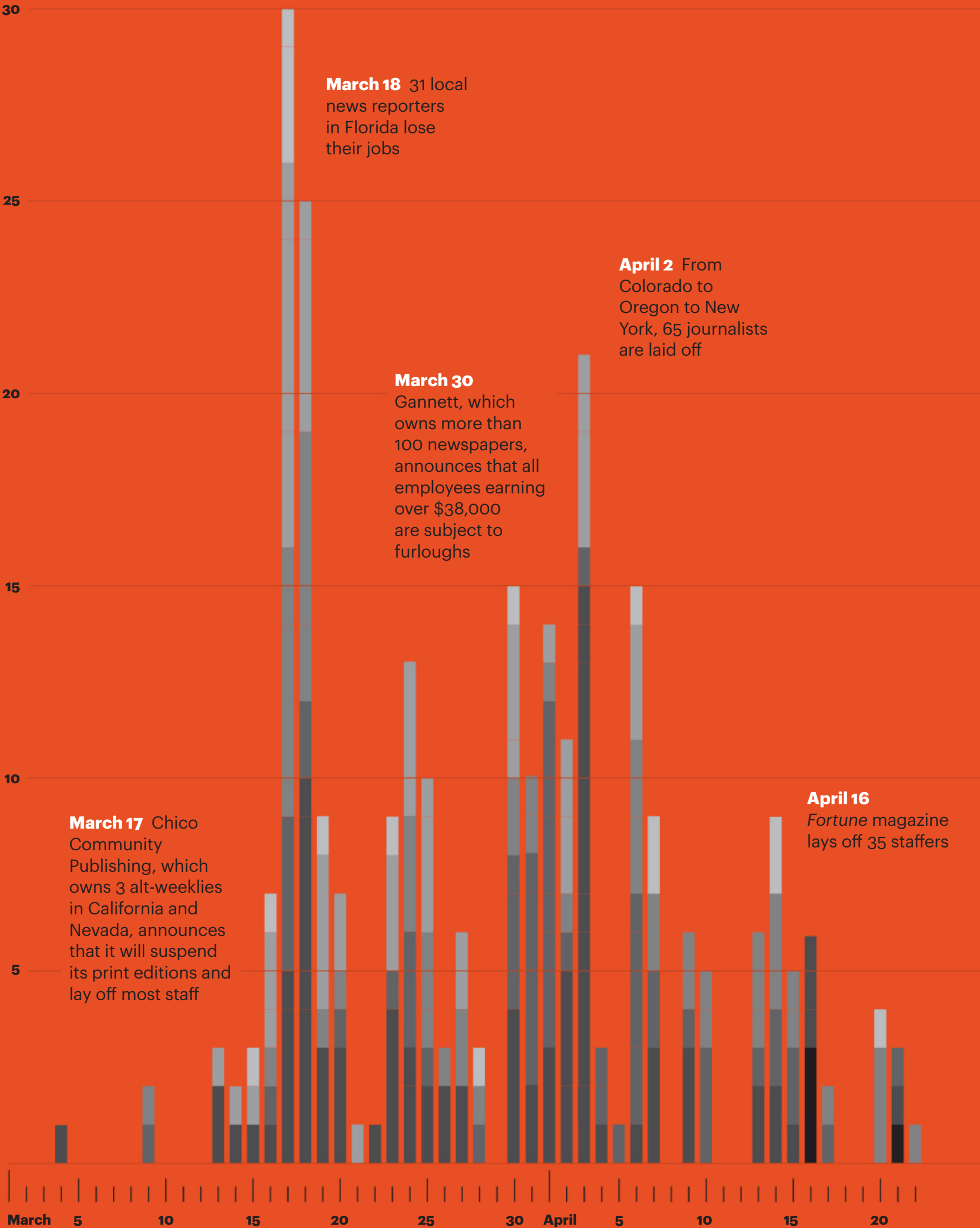
By forcing people inside and requiring that we pay close attention to the news for essential, constantly updating information, the coronavirus had locked us all in an impossible negotiation, as we tried to care for our bodies and our minds. “When your life is likely to change dramatically based on the news tonight or tomorrow, it’s hard to not be glued to the news,” McNeil told me. Her solution—to seek answers from people, not timelines—sounded like an appealing means of escape. And it reminded me of something that Jaron Lanier had said when we spoke: social media as we know it can’t be trusted, since those algorithms are designed to make us nuts. The only way to get reliable information online, he’d told me, is directly from legitimate, human news sources.

I asked McNeil if she now preferred private messaging to lurking on the public Web. Would the shift in her news consumption survive into whatever new normal we were stumbling toward? “I think these kinds of community networks that have come together are becoming very habitual to me,” she replied. “I don’t check the main feed on Twitter, I check group DMs, and that’s more

important to me than whatever is happening on my feed.” She was continuing to evaluate her relationship with the internet, that someone to whom she was so attached. “When something dramatically changes like this,” she said, “when everyone has to adapt all of a sudden, it makes you wonder what else can happen and have you living a different life than you did just the other day.”

Within weeks, she found out, when America was shaken by the murders of three Black people. Ahmaud Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old, was killed by white predators while out for a run near Brunswick, Georgia; in May, a video depicting his death went viral. Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old emergency medical technician, was shot eight times by police who forcibly entered her home one night while she was asleep in her bed. Then Derek Chauvin, a white cop employed by the Minneapolis Police Department, pressed his knee into the neck of a forty-six-year-old named George Floyd for about eight minutes while three officers stood watch. Black people responded by flooding the streets of Minneapolis in protest. Soon, cities all over were in a full-blown uprising against anti-Black police brutality. Press coverage of the coronavirus, which disproportionately affected the same people targeted by violent cops, all but disappeared from newspapers and cable news stations, seemingly overnight.

“Of course, I cannot put my phone down,” McNeil told me in mid-June. When we’d first met, she’d been reading news around the election as a “horse race media frenzy, which is a lot of invention of news, blowing gas,” she said. Since then, her perspective had changed—everything had become a matter of life and death. Political ideas that had previously been considered niche were, she saw, now receiving serious consideration in the mainstream press and on social media. McNeil found herself gravitating toward “systems thinkers”—writers able to make connections between breaking news and broader conditions of life. Reading their work filled her with a sense of optimism. One of these people was Mariame Kaba, who wrote for the *Times* about abolishing police departments and who tweets from the account @prison-culture. Yes, this meant that McNeil was now logged in to Twitter again. But it was on her own terms. **CJR**

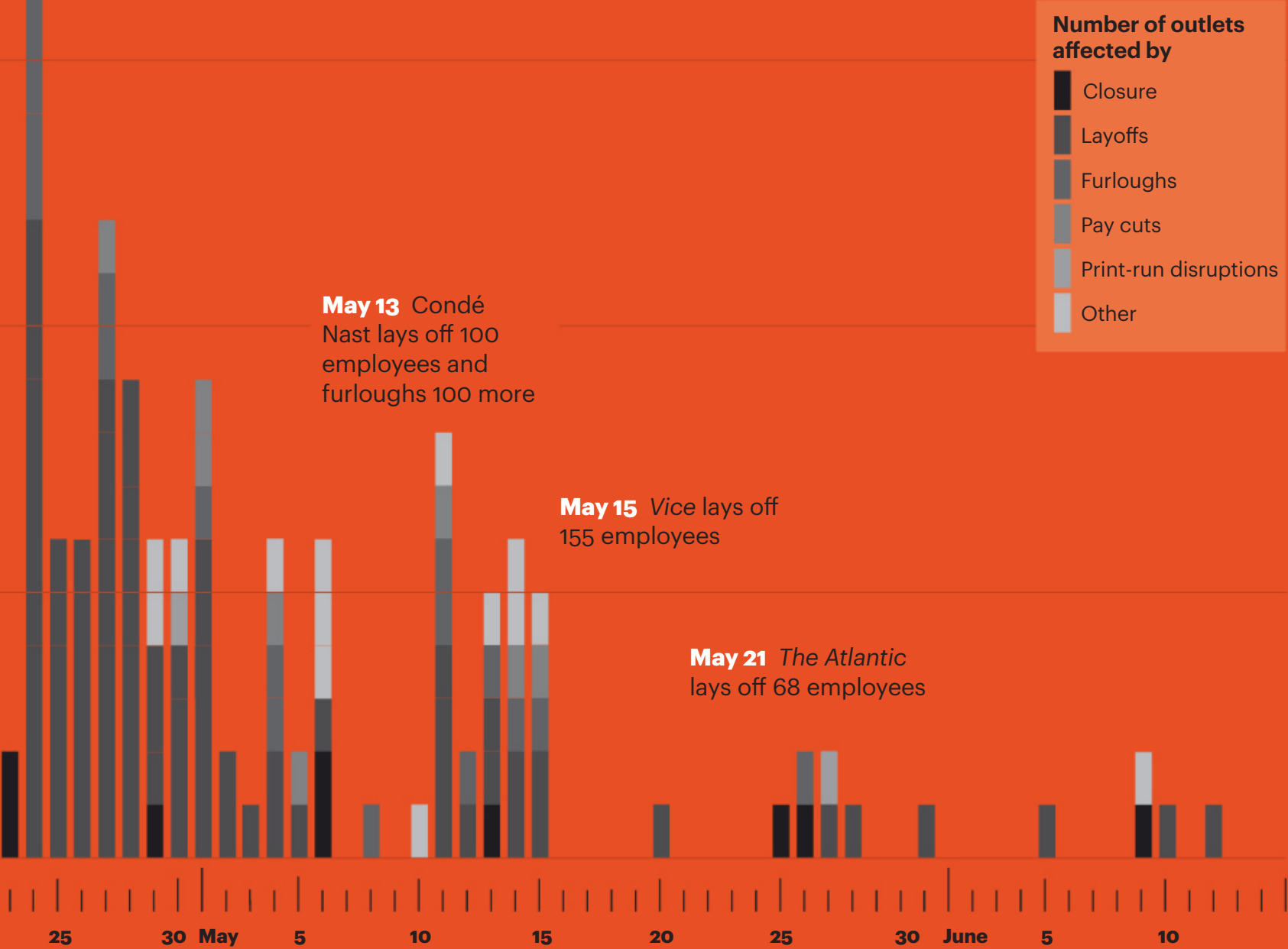


Layoff Season

April 24 At least 102 journalists are laid off across the country. Staff is furloughed at Lee Enterprises, Schneps Media, Future Media Group, the *Tampa Bay Times*, and the *New Orleans Advocate*

For years, the journalism industry has been in financial decline. In March, when the coronavirus pandemic shot through the United States, business imploded. Reporters lost their jobs at an alarming rate; some outlets folded entirely. All through the spring, with a presidential election in sight, media workers—deemed “essential”—were thrown into unemployment.

ABOUT THE NUMBERS This data was collected through the Journalism Crisis Project, a partnership between CJR and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. We are continuing to update these numbers online at cjr.org.







Identity crisis at MSNBC

CABLE NEWS

Tuned Out

AUTHOR

Adam Piore

Every afternoon at a quarter past four, an email goes around 30 Rockefeller Plaza to all of MSNBC's on-screen personalities, all of their executive producers, all of their bosses, and all of their bosses' bosses. It contains a long spreadsheet, in yellow and white, meticulously detailing total viewership in fifteen-minute increments throughout the previous day's schedule. When the numbers are good, everyone's cellphone blows up with congratulatory messages from colleagues. When the numbers are bad, there's silence. "You cannot understand the building, the network, or anything without understanding the centrality of that," a high-level MSNBC employee told me. "I can't overstate the degree to which it has an impact. Everyone gets those numbers. Everyone looks at it. Everyone knows what it is. Everyone knows when someone's rating well, when someone's rating poorly."

It's only natural that ratings would be important to cable executives. But in the halls of 30 Rock, where MSNBC has undergone multiple reinventions over the years, those spreadsheets have been a compass, guiding a seemingly dissonant ensemble of on-air talent. These days, the lineup includes, among others, left-leaning commentators like Rachel Maddow, Lawrence O'Donnell, and Chris Hayes, along with centrist Republicans like Joe Scarborough, a former congressman, and Nicolle Wallace, who once quarterbacked the daily media spin of President George W. Bush. There's Brian Williams, Chuck

Todd, and Katy Tur, old-school newspeople with inside-the-Beltway sensibilities. And until recently, MSNBC also had a blaring establishment Democrat, Chris Matthews, whom I watched on live television in late February as he compared the victory of Bernie Sanders in the Nevada Democratic primary to the Nazi conquest of France. As Matthews told viewers, “The general, Reynaud, calls up Churchill and says, ‘It’s over.’ And Churchill says, ‘How can that be? You’ve got the greatest army in Europe. How can it be over?’ He said, ‘It’s over.’” Matthews added, “I had that suppressed feeling.”

I was taken aback by the analogy. It turned out that others were, too. Within days, criticisms of his Sanders comments were piled on top of long-standing #MeToo accusations against Matthews, and he announced that he was retiring, effective immediately. It was also widely reported that the Sanders campaign had been banging on the door at MSNBC for a while, upset over a perception that the message coming from the network’s assorted talkers was that Sanders was not to be taken seriously, and even feared. Ahead of the Democratic debate in Las Vegas, which MSNBC sponsored, Sanders had marched up to the event’s producer, stuck his finger in the man’s face, and yelled, “Your coverage of my campaign is not fair!” Later, outside the greenroom, Sanders took his complaint directly to Phil Griffin, MSNBC’s president.

“Their news coverage from the field reporters, I had no qualms about,” Bill Neidhardt, the Iowa deputy state director for the Sanders campaign, told me. “It was the anchors, the analysts they brought on.” A sample on-air exchange: “If you’re voting for him because you think he’ll win the election because he’ll galvanize heretofore sleepy parts of the electorate, then politically, you’re a fool, and that’s just a fact,” James Carville, a senior Democratic consultant, said. “You’re describing what sounds a lot like political suicide,” Wallace replied. To Sanders and his supporters, it seemed that MSNBC, a cable network ostensibly geared toward Democratic voters, was unwilling to engage with an important faction of the party. “What bothers people is that MSNBC takes up this oxygen as a gatekeeper of acceptable liberal thought,” Adam Johnson,

a media analyst for Fair.org and the host of a podcast called *Citations Needed*, said. “Yet most of the hosts have a pretty well-documented ideological perspective that is hostile to what is viewed as being to the left of the Democratic Party consensus.”

MSNBC has rejected the notion that it ever demonstrated bias against Sanders. “He is due fair, not fawning coverage, like any other campaign,” Alexandra Roberts, a network spokesperson, told me. Besides, she said, as the race evolved, so did the balance of conversation. To an extent, that’s true; for a few weeks in February, when Sanders looked like a leading contender, producers started booking more of his evangelists. Beyond that, however, when I asked around at MSNBC, it became clear that election coverage has been driven less by a particular political view than by a faithfulness to numbers—hence the importance, in the office, of the daily email that breaks the ratings down for all to see. The majority of MSNBC viewers are over fifty—which is to say, they’re Biden people. And the person most responsible for ensuring they’ve been served play-it-safe centrism from Beltway-credentialed anchors and pundits has been Andy Lack, the chairman of NBC News and MSNBC. “He’s the most slavishly establishment person I’ve ever encountered,” the high-level MSNBC employee said. Lack’s tenure came to a close at the end of May.

Measured from a business standpoint, MSNBC did well under Lack. Last year, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence, its operating revenue topped a billion dollars for the first time, more than double what it was in 2014. Over the same period, advertising surged from \$212 million to \$614 million. Four years ago, MSNBC was the sixteenth-ranked network in total viewers. This year, it’s second. It has, at times, even bested Fox.

But those numbers could be attributed as much to Lack’s acumen as to Donald Trump’s presence in the White House. And many on MSNBC’s staff found Lack, who is seventy-three, to be a problematic leader. During his time at the helm, male employees were accused of predatory behavior toward their female colleagues. Personnel changes—made not to protect women, it seemed, but to chase ratings—left current and former staff members unhappy. Some found Lack’s temperament to

If the tensions—and outright hostilities—present in the Democratic Party are also coursing through the halls of the network that aims to cover it, you would think that might make for good television.

be harsh and intimidating. Reporting on sexual abuse was shelved. Politically, MSNBC has undergone numerous makeovers. There is a sense, including among some top anchors, that the network has never quite known what it wants to be. (Lack declined to comment for this piece.)

If the tensions—and outright hostilities—present in the Democratic Party are also coursing through the halls of the network that aims to cover it, you would think that might make for good television. Instead, what the audience sees is a breathless, perpetual four-alarm fire drill, a confused jumble of viewpoints tipped to favor the old guard, and personalities forged in the Darwinian crucible of Nielsen quarter-hour rating reports. Sometimes, the shows are simply boring. As I watched, it felt like a shame that the ideological conflicts within MSNBC don't appear on air, except insofar as they're expressed by the instability of its programming. Since the network's founding, it has struggled to find its footing, in ways that reflect compelling shifts in the American political discourse.

Several rebrands ago, in December 1995, MSNBC was introduced at a press conference as a big idea for the new millennium. Bob Wright, NBC's president and CEO, was flanked by suits from General Electric and Microsoft, who were collaborating on the project (hence the "MS" in the name); Bill Gates joined via live video feed. "MSNBC will redefine the way that people get information by making available news content of unparalleled breadth and depth whenever and whatever form it may take," Wright said. This was early on in the dot-com era, when the bubble was just beginning to inflate.

Lack, then the president of NBC News, was among the executives in attendance. A well-dressed but slightly disheveled figure, he has big, bushy eyebrows, a receded hairline, and a modest paunch. He'd gotten his start as a producer on *60 Minutes*, worked with Walter Cronkite at CBS, and, in 1993, after *Dateline* rigged the explosion of a truck to make a safety segment look dramatic, was hired by NBC News to restore its credibility. With Lack in charge, Tom Brokaw overtook ABC's Peter Jennings to become the most-watched anchor on television.

Onstage for the MSNBC rollout, Lack outlined his plans to lead the network into the internet age. Backed with the full resources of NBC News and Microsoft, he said, this new twenty-four-hour cable channel would "run with any big breaking story," on air and online. The venture was designed to attract "a whole new generation of viewers, the millions of people sixteen and older who use the internet regularly." It was expected to reach more than thirty-five million Americans by the year 2000.

Cast and Crew

The people who have made—
and remade—MSNBC



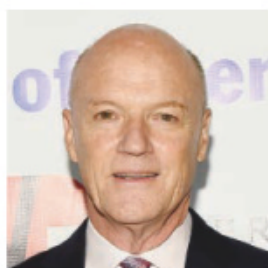
Keith Olbermann

Called “Limbaugh for Lefties,” he helped solidify MSNBC’s liberal identity during the George W. Bush years.



Andy Lack

The person most responsible for ensuring that MSNBC viewers were served play-it-safe centrism.



Phil Griffin

Seizing on the energy around Democratic politics, he went on a hiring spree.



Joe Scarborough

A Washington insider eager to mock Trump but less willing to confront Biden.



Niccole Wallace

Among the last remaining Republicans at MSNBC, she has thrived in part on her attacks on Trump.



Cesar Conde

Formerly of Telemundo and Univision, he is the incoming chairman of the NBCUniversal News Group.

MSNBC went live in 1996 from Fort Lee, New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan. (The headquarters was later moved to Secaucus.) Sets were designed to resemble internet startups, with laptops visible on desks. The programs had names like *Homepage*, *Internight*, and *News Chat*. They scored some early successes. MSNBC’s coverage of Kosovo, the Columbine shooting, and the death of Princess Diana, with somber stand-ups from the dark streets of Paris, allowed the network to show off its breaking-news chops. In June 1999, MSNBC topped CNN in viewership for the first time with its coverage of the wedding of Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones, at Windsor Castle.

But even in those days, MSNBC executives realized they had a problem of purpose. The hours of extra airtime on cable came in handy when the world was on fire, but you still had to find a way to keep people interested after the firefighters put out the flames and everybody went home. When there was nothing big to cover, ratings plummeted. “It’s a great business to be in, the breaking-news business, when there’s breaking news,” Erik Sorenson, MSNBC’s president and general manager, told a reporter at the time. “It’s a very suspect business when there’s no breaking news.” Journalists can fall into a trap: “You do stay with a story—and we’ve all been guilty of that, milking and milking and milking.”

The challenge of keeping viewers tuned in absent any big news was particularly evident at prime time, which offered the highest advertising rates and thus the greatest pressure to perform. To fill the hours, Lack and Sorenson experimented with a format they called “the friends of MSNBC,” shows that featured a sort of Washington dinner party, live. After that, they tried the version with warring guests, a model pioneered on CNN with *Crossfire*. To find the right formula, Lack, Sorenson, and other executives experimented with a wide array of people, from Paul Begala to Oliver North. Keith Olbermann began his first stint at MSNBC in 1997, hosting a show in the 8pm slot. On one particularly slow news day, he led off an episode with the publication of that year’s *Farmers’ Almanac*. “It was as bad as it sounds,” he told me. “We weren’t doing well, and I was not having a good time.” When Bill Clinton was impeached, Olbermann’s audience increased more than tenfold, he remembers. But after that story ran its course, MSNBC’s ratings problems returned.

The year 2001 was a turning point. In May, Lack was made president of NBC, which meant that his attention was no longer focused on cable news. In September, terrorist attacks on the United States upended the world—and transformed TV journalism. MSNBC covered the story, but advertising revenue fell. Desperate for more viewers, the network unveiled an entirely reimagined programming slate for the spring 2002 season, with a new slogan: “America’s News Channel.” It was “a new name, for a new day and a new time,” Sorenson wrote in a memo to the staff, explaining a need to “serve the American people.” The tail feathers of the peacock logo became red, white, and blue; there were American-flag ribbons in the background on sets. New hosts were brought in, figures with bombastic personalities and strong opinions: Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels, got a show; Patrick Buchanan, a xenophobic, conservative firebrand, was paired with Bill Press,

“If you guys don’t get your fucking shit together, we’re going to board this place up.”

a liberal pundit who previously worked for Jerry Brown, the governor of California; MSNBC also briefly brought in Jesse Ventura, a professional wrestler turned politician. The splashiest and most expensive move was the hiring of Phil Donahue—the old king of daytime talk, whom MSNBC lured out of retirement and pitted directly against Bill O’Reilly, on Fox.

The result, in many cases, was an undignified spectacle that embarrassed the old-school stars of NBC News, many of whom were reluctant to appear on cable. To make matters worse, the ratings barely moved. Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, was so frustrated that he appeared on Fox News with a message to the executives who worked for him. “I think the standard right now is Fox, and I want to be as interesting and as edgy as you guys are,” he said. Afterward, the *Wall Street Journal* called MSNBC’s ratings “abysmal” and reported that staffers were uncomfortable with its new identity, “which they see as a cynical attempt to cash in on post-Sept.

11 patriotism.” The article added, “A day of reckoning—and possibly yet another change of direction—may be at hand for the network.” In early 2003, Donahue’s show was canceled, followed immediately by an embarrassing leak of memos suggesting that his bosses got rid of him because he’d insisted on using his platform to air arguments against the invasion of Iraq. In one missive, an executive worried that Donahue’s opposition would interfere with MSNBC’s efforts to capitalize on the “anticipated larger audience who will tune in during a time of war.”

Around this time, Lack left to become the chairman and CEO of Sony Music Entertainment. For the next few years, MSNBC’s problems continued. Bill Wolff became the network’s vice president of prime-time programming in 2005. Wolff recalls his reaction when he first saw the ratings: “Absolute shit,” he told me. “They were running, like, eighth in a three-team race and just getting killed.” That year, Jeff Zucker, in many ways the paragon of media executives, was made the chief

MSNBC was never an ideological project. It was always about the ratings.

executive of NBCUniversal. One day, Zucker visited New Jersey for a meeting with MSNBC's senior management and top producers. "Do what you've got to do," he told everyone. "But if you guys don't get your fucking shit together, we're going to board this place up."

MSNBC's liberal identity was born amid that atmosphere of crisis. It was also a period of upheaval in American life. Olbermann, now hosting a show called *Countdown* in the 8pm slot, was in the anchor chair in late August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina made landfall over Louisiana and Mississippi. Over the next several days, he aired frontline reports from the flood zone with harrowing rescue footage and interviews with traumatized survivors. As he cut from one shot to the next, Olbermann grew increasingly frustrated by the Bush administration's response. He reached his tipping point, he recalled, when Michael Chertoff, the secretary of homeland security, appeared at a press conference and said, "Louisiana is a city that is largely under water."

The following Monday, Olbermann devoted a segment to eviscerating the federal response to Katrina. He cut to footage of Bush praising Michael Brown, then the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency: "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." Then Olbermann aired devastating images of the scene. "This is the law and order and terror government," he said. "It promised protection, or at least amelioration, against all threats, conventional, radiological, or biological.

It has just proved that it cannot save its citizens from a biological weapon called standing water." He went on to compare the president to Marie Antoinette. It was a diatribe of a kind not typically seen on NBC, even on cable; it received millions of hits online. In a later interview, Griffin, who had overseen Olbermann's show, said that he'd been uncomfortable with Olbermann's tone. But the reaction from executives, Olbermann recalled to me, was uninterested silence.

So a year later, when he again felt moved to speak out against Bush, he went for it. At an event with veterans in Salt Lake City, Donald Rumsfeld, the defense secretary, accused critics of the Iraq War and the administration's counterterrorism efforts of trying to appease "a new type of fascism" and of suffering from "moral or intellectual confusion," making a comparison with the concessions European leaders made to Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. When Olbermann read those comments, he said, "the back of my head blew off." On his show, he delivered what he would later call

a “special comment”: “In what country was Mr. Rumsfeld raised?” Olbermann asked viewers. “On what side of the battle for freedom did he dream one day to fight? With what country has he confused the United States of America?” While producing the segment, Olbermann thought to himself, “If NBC doesn’t fire me because of this, and I don’t get thrown into the back of a black car headed for Gitmo or something, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

Instead, Olbermann said, Griffin appeared the next day in his office and informed him that his ratings had shot up 50 percent. The anti-Rumsfeld segment had gone viral, Griffin told him, on a new form of social media called YouTube. Could Olbermann do a “special comment” every show?

Olbermann declined to commit. But on future episodes, he would accuse Bush of failing to learn the lessons of Vietnam and of perpetuating the “monumental lie that is our presence in Iraq.” He spoke out against the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which deprived enemy alien combatants of legal protections normally afforded to United States citizens. He began tracking terrorist threat level alerts, suggesting that they were suspiciously timed. His rants tapped into a deep vein of discontent; his clips went viral. Olbermann, previously known best as the face of ESPN’s *SportsCenter*, became a political celebrity—“Limbaugh for Lefties,” according to *New York* magazine—and his numbers continued rising. In 2006, *Countdown* scored MSNBC its first 8pm ratings victory over CNN in five years. Within a year, Olbermann’s ratings jumped another 29 percent; by 2008 they hit 1.77 million.

Olbermann had demonstrated what MSNBC’s role could be. “MSNBC is now a player in the competitive world of cable news in a way that we have not been for many, many years, and that’s a really big deal,” Dan Abrams, who had recently been appointed MSNBC’s general manager, told the *Los Angeles Times*. MSNBC, he added, was “finally finding its identity.” Soon, the network moved to 30 Rock, into a pair of newly renovated, 8,500-square-foot studios outfitted with more than two hundred miles of cable, two hundred eighty high-definition monitors, and six high-definition projectors. Griffin, after a three-year term as vice president of the main

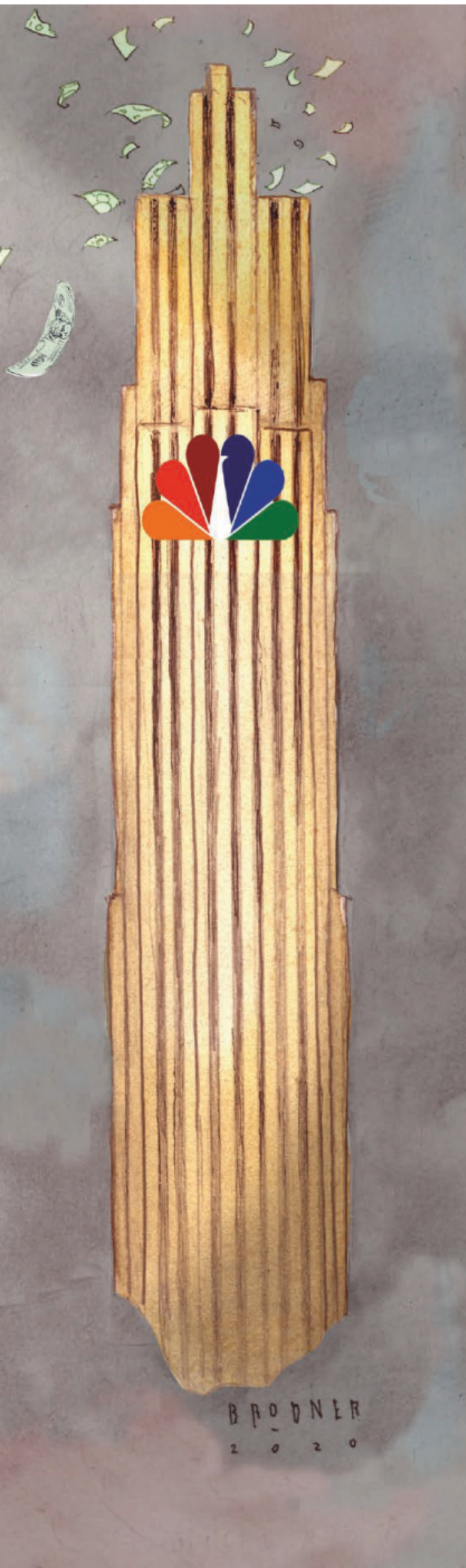
network, where he oversaw the *Today* show, returned as MSNBC’s president. He happily embraced a liberal agenda. Over the next five years, he went all in: first by announcing that Maddow would follow Olbermann, in the 9pm slot; then by hiring O’Donnell, Hayes, Melissa Harris-Perry, Joy Reid, and a slate of other progressives. The new shows were hits.

“There’s an old idea in media: Do you build the car for the driver, or do you pick a driver for the car?” Wolff, who served as executive producer on Maddow’s show, told me. “That is to say, do you build your product, in the news business, around your personalities, or do you have a system and you just plug people into the system?” In cable news, he said, “You’ve got to pick the right drivers. It’s about the drivers.”

In November 2008, Barack Obama was elected president. MSNBC seized on the energy around Democratic politics. Olbermann secured a four-year contract extension worth an estimated \$30 million. By 2010, MSNBC was the number two news channel in prime time, behind Fox, and in the daytime it was the second most watched in the “key demographic,” consisting of viewers aged twenty-five to fifty-four. Griffin brought in more progressives and launched a two-year, multimillion-dollar marketing campaign with ads directed by Spike Lee. Set over dramatic music, the spots featured images of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Obama. At a gleeful town hall meeting, Griffin unveiled MSNBC’s new slogan: “Lean Forward.” He told employees, “We’ve taken on CNN and we beat them. Now it’s time to take on Fox.”

The mood seemed high. But there were dissenters among the ranks: some managers and established journalists grumbled about the dismantling of NBC’s reputation for objective newsgathering (and about having their seats stolen at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner). In 2011, Olbermann left under acrimonious circumstances—he’d recently been suspended for donating money to Democratic candidates—and decamped to Al Gore’s Current TV, a wannabe progressive channel that never took off. Still, you couldn’t argue with the money. By 2012, according to S&P Global, MSNBC’s profits had grown to \$235.9





million—a 25 percent spike over a two-year period. Comcast bought out GE for a majority stake in NBCUniversal, and Steve Burke, the executive tapped to run it, consolidated the news units. Griffin was elevated on the organizational chart to be the equal of Steve Capus, the head of NBC News. MSNBC received more investment from its corporate overseers. Griffin decided to throw his own correspondents' dinner after-party.

MSNBC was never an ideological project, however. It was always about the ratings. "Corporations are organisms. They're like sharks," a former MSNBC executive told me. "They just move toward the money. That's all they do. It's not moral or immoral; it's amoral. They follow what gives them money. And that was how it started. There's no liberal overseer, and there really isn't coordination with the Democrats. There isn't. It really began by luck. It was just Olbermann doing his thing. *Holy shit, let's do that more.* And then Matthews kind of followed suit. And by 2008—so three years later—along came Rachel to have her own show, and the rest is history."

As time went on, Griffin's formula would face the inverse of the problem MSNBC had in its early years. Back then, when there was not enough news, anchors didn't have enough to say. Now all they did was talk, and they all talked about the same things, in the same way, on repeat. In an analysis of 108 hours of cable programming over three days in November and December 2012, the Pew Research Center found that MSNBC devoted 85 percent of its programming to opinion, with only the remainder going to "factual reporting." That figure far outpaced CNN and even Fox. The ratings started to drop. Mark Kornblau, who joined MSNBC in 2014 and is now the executive vice president for communications in the NBCUniversal News Group, recalled attending focus groups in which even the progressive participants complained. "I love steak, but you're giving me steak all day long," he heard them say. "Put on *West Wing* reruns at five o'clock, or something."

While MSNBC paid out expensive contracts to its opinionated hosts, CNN focused on reporting. By the third quarter of 2014, MSNBC hit a low point, falling from second to fourth place in the ratings among viewers in the key demographic—behind Fox, CNN, and HLN (formerly Headline News). During the same period, CNN's ratings doubled. Naturally, along with the decline in viewership, MSNBC's profit fell: from 2012 to 2014, it decreased by \$54 million. Something had to change. "You can look at the dysfunction in Washington, the wariness about politics, the low approval ratings," Griffin said at the time. "That's had an impact. But we've got to adjust; we've got to evolve."

There was trouble at NBC News, too: Brian Williams, by then the *Nightly News* anchor, was found to have misrepresented aspects of his reporting on the Iraq War; he was suspended, then demoted. There was conflict at the *Today* show. Upper management at NBCUniversal decided they needed Andy Lack back. To accept the job, Lack resigned from a position he'd only just recently taken, as chief executive of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the agency that oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other federally supported international news media. He returned to 30 Rock in April 2015. Griffin found himself with a new boss and was obliged to follow Lack's lead. The plan was to remake MSNBC in the image of its founding: as a premier destination for reporting, backed by the resources of NBC

News. “The news is the star,” Lack said at the time. “We are building a network that has as its core value delivering breaking news better than anyone else. It is not about the anchor who happens to be delivering the news.”

Lack and Griffin canceled all of MSNBC’s liberal daytime programs. The prime-time lineup—which Lack referred to as the channel’s “op-ed pages”—likewise seemed in danger of being upended. Once Donald Trump was elected president, Lack brought in Wallace, along with Greta Van Susteren, a Fox News veteran; Hugh Hewitt, a conservative radio personality; and a slew of right-wing commentators that included Peggy Noonan, Charlie Sykes, and George Will. He also signed Megyn Kelly to a three-year, \$69 million contract and placed her at *Today*, NBC’s most important franchise.

“Andy’s view was not ‘We want to change the ideology of the network,’” Kornblau told me. “It was: ‘It’s boring if everybody says the same thing, and our audience will want to hear what conservatives are saying even if they don’t agree with it. And so let’s get those voices in the mix. Let’s get some voices on there that aren’t predictably toeing the Democratic line, so that there’s more interplay and back-and-forth and diversity of perspective.’” Lack hoped, too, that figures like Van Susteren could persuade Republicans to appear on MSNBC, which they had been loath to do before.

Lack recruited a new ally to shepherd many of these changes: Jonathan Wald, formerly an executive producer for Don Lemon at CNN. Wald became MSNBC’s senior vice president for programming and development. Though Griffin ranked above him on the organizational chart, Wald had executive producer credits at both *Today* and the *NBC Nightly News*, and many interpreted his arrival as an indication that Griffin’s days were numbered. Soon, Wald was showing up at daily meetings with prime-time executive producers, offering story suggestions and providing feedback on guests—feedback, it was assumed, that reflected Lack’s preferences.

The plan might have worked, except that it did not. Instead, it was Hayes and O’Donnell, the progressives, who became must-watch television for the network’s anti-Trump viewers, who started growing in number. The ratings for those shows skyrocketed. Maddow,

too, was a fan favorite. Nobody wanted to tune in to MSNBC to hear from GOP pundits. What they came for was seeing the opposite of Fox. Gloating and still somewhat bitter, MSNBC’s progressive faction took swipes at Lack in the press. Many of Wald’s suggestions were ignored; eventually, he was demoted. “Hayes, Maddow, O’Donnell—the entire primetime lineup is doing record numbers and Lack can’t stand it. It makes him furious,” Ryan Grim, a former MSNBC contributor, wrote in *HuffPost*, quoting an anonymous senior MSNBC source. “Tossing those primetime hosts overboard while they’re raking in viewership and revenue has so far proved an elusive task.”

Maddow, Hayes, and O’Donnell have remained. Van Susteren and company were let go. When I asked MSNBC to comment on its strategic decisions and the implications for its brand identity, Roberts, the spokesperson, said she took issue with any suggestion that MSNBC hasn’t settled on what it wants to be. It is, above all, she said, a twenty-four-hour news channel capable of going toe to toe with any cable news network. The daytime programming is devoted to breaking news, while prime time retains its “point of view” shows. The changes in recent years amount to adjustments of “format,” Roberts argued, not failed ideological reinventions. “We cover the news aggressively and provide compelling and insightful analysis,” she told me. “Our goal is to own the big stories, put our unrivaled NBC News and MSNBC resources behind it, and cover it in a way that is valid, aggressive, and has an in-depth perspective.”

In February, almost immediately after I started watching MSNBC all the time, my wife began complaining that her quality of life had gone into marked decline. It was not that I made her watch it with me. She refused. It was that, according to her, I had entered a state of heightened anxiety and excitement. I ambushed her with polling data when she was coming out of the laundry room. I interrupted her when she was talking about our kids’ schoolwork to speculate on whether Biden would make peace with the Bernie wing of the Democratic Party. Often, she complained, I wasn’t “present.” I couldn’t help it. I was preoccupied by the possibility that Russia would interfere—again—in the November election.

Even with vast resources to draw upon, cable news is a repetitive medium. Part of my obsession with these stories reflected the way MSNBC hammered at them over and over again, with endless contributors on split screens, chewing every angle. The arguments were fairly consistent, and relied on conventional wisdom. I'm sure it happened once or twice, but in my months of watching MSNBC consistently I did not see one voter interviewed; everyone was discussed in terms of demographic groups and trends. The opinions of each host were predictable; the more I watched, the more they seemed like old friends. But in every case it was a masochistic relationship, one defined by a persistent sense of doom. In the age of Trump, these shows, even the news programs, almost always left me with a sense that the world was on the verge of collapse.

The greatest fear, perhaps, was what would happen if I didn't watch. Occasionally, for brief moments, MSNBC would offer hope, but it came as comfort in the idea that many more viewers like me would tune in, discover the truth about America's political crisis, and rally in pursuit of redemption. Other people,

I learned, shared the feeling. A friend of my mother's, a retired professor named Ann Yee, keeps MSNBC on all the time. "There's a palpable fear that Trump's world of absolute power, ignorance, and white supremacy will become our new reality, because nothing seems to take him down," Yee said. "That's what makes us insane. But the knowledge that there are still a few loud voices out there who continue to bring light to truth is the reassuring part."

And then the coronavirus hit. It was earth shattering, and there was plenty to report. MSNBC seemed at its best when it tried to get ahead of the story or dig behind the headlines; Maddow did an admirable job on her show, contrasting images of empty, pandemic-stricken Europe with the Trump administration's avoidance of the subject. When states began to shut down—and it became clear that Biden would receive the Democratic nomination—MSNBC bailed on its horse race political coverage and devoted itself to reporting on the spread of COVID-19. Here was a breaking-news event tailor-made for the Andy Lack era.

The daytime shows began highlighting the latest developments with a rubric placed prominently on-screen: "Know the Facts." But there was a problem: the facts were bleak, changed only incrementally as the hours passed, and were repeated on every show. Soon enough, MSNBC returned to form, scrutinizing the news first as information, then as evidence of Trump's dangerous incompetence. Eventually, it became excruciatingly tedious to watch.

The coverage also highlighted the challenge of following traditional journalism rules in the Trump era. During the day, the president's many failures of leadership were subject to discussion; in the evening,

COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Edward-Isaac Dove

The Atlantic

Now you can't get the spontaneous voter voice, the person who wasn't expecting to be quoted. That's hard, because I think part of the lesson that a lot of campaign reporters took from the 2016 election was that we needed to make sure that we were talking to people other than the ones that we would normally talk to to see what was going on politically in this country.

Now much bigger changes are happening in the country, societal changes, economic changes. We don't have a good way of getting our own measurement of it. Polls have their value, but a lot of polls have proven to be off when it comes to the sample groups and end up not being representative. Polls are not the perfect way to do this.



The New York attorney general began investigating allegations of sexual harassment, retaliation, and gender discrimination.

MSNBC aired his coronavirus briefings live. Early on, I saw value in that; I learned crucial information. As the crisis unfolded, however, health officials faded into the background. Trump co-opted their time, using the briefings as an opportunity to browbeat reporters and play to his base. “From a purely journalistic news point of view, I can’t imagine any other circumstance in which a news network would turn over hours a day of its airwaves to an event where they know that misstatements, disinformation, and outright lies will be disseminated,” Mark Lukasiewicz, a former NBC News executive who was in charge of breaking-news specials and is now dean of the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, told me. On Twitter, a number of MSNBC’s hosts condemned the practice of carrying the press briefings live. Even Lack wrote, on the NBC News website, that “Trump’s daily briefings, which sometimes include pertinent and significant information, have also frequently become a sideshow, filled with false and misleading statements, compulsive boasting and self-promotional videos.”

Some networks dialed back their coverage, but MSNBC continued on for weeks, basking in the ratings and allowing Trump to dominate the news narrative with falsehoods—just as he had during the 2016 campaign. (Lack wrote that his newsroom was “aggressively fact-checking in real time, assessing the value to viewers minute to minute and cutting away when warranted,” but to me, the efforts were subtle.) And as the shock of the pandemic began to wear off, political overtones returned, recasting the network’s emphatically

partisan coverage of the election in a more somber light.

On April 16, *Morning Joe* landed a pair of special guests, Joe Biden and his wife, Jill. The show airs from 6am to 9am, and the Bidens wouldn’t be coming on until the last hour, so Scarborough and his cohost and wife, Mika Brzezinski, a liberal commentator, needed to fill time. To set the stage, they opened with a clip of John Kennedy, a Republican senator from Louisiana, appearing the previous night on Fox to argue that it was time to reopen the economy. “If we don’t, it’s going to collapse, and if the US economy collapses, the world economy collapses,” Kennedy said. “Trying to burn down the village to save it is foolish.”

The camera cut to Scarborough. “That’s just one of the dumbest things I’ve actually heard him say, and he’s said so many stupid things over the past year, it’s hard to count,” he said. The rest of the block was devoted to the hypocrisy of Kennedy and other Trump allies who claimed to represent “the party of life” but, in Scarborough’s telling, seemed fine

with poor, elderly vets contracting COVID-19 and dropping dead to save large corporations. “Sure, senior citizens are gonna die, but what the hell?” he said, impersonating GOP leaders. “We really got to get Wall Street moving again.” Other topics included a segment on Trump’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies and an interview with the author of *The Toddler in Chief*, whose cover features a picture of a balloon designed to look like Trump as a baby.

When it was finally time for the Bidens, Scarborough welcomed them by noting that in the middle of a pandemic, it was a shame that Americans didn’t have a leader capable of expressing empathy. Could Joe Biden, “as a man who’s endured loss,” share with the public what was on his mind?

“Well, Joe and Mika, I really mean it, what’s on my mind is they’re on my mind,” Biden replied. “I mean, people are frightened, they’re frightened.” He was not pressed to answer policy questions.

If things had gone according to plan, Lack would likely have announced his retirement at the end of this year. “What has become powerfully clear during this pandemic is that the heart of journalism has never been stronger,” he wrote in April, for the NBC News website. “As ever, journalists are asking tough questions and going where the facts lead.” He went on: “Make no mistake, journalists have plenty of faults. Our coverage is rarely, if ever, flawless. We are a collection of human beings making hundreds of decisions a day. During times like these, as millions of people turn to the news for answers, the choices we make about what to air and how to report it can make the difference between panic or persistence, and even life or death. Humbled by the responsibility we bear, we try our damndest to serve our audience.” He closed by saying how lucky he felt to have a career in the news business. “In this moment,” he wrote, “it feels more like a calling.”

Lack’s essay may have been part rallying cry, part earnest reflection on his work, as he perhaps knew that his last days at NBC were approaching sooner than anticipated. At the end of 2019, the New York attorney general’s office had begun investigating allegations of sexual harassment, retaliation, and gender discrimination at NBC News; according

to *Variety*, Lack’s behavior was central to the questioning. Women who had come forward with allegations against Brokaw, Matt Lauer, and other NBC stars past and present were interviewed about Lack’s awareness of their cases and how he responded. Several women had been compelled to sign nondisclosure agreements. (An NBCUniversal spokesperson told *Variety*, “We are not aware of any inquiry.”) “It’s time to ask what top management at NBC and other outlets are doing to change the culture that allowed Lauer, along with numerous news anchors with questionable attitudes toward women, to stay in their positions for so long,” Addie Zinone, a former production assistant on the *Today* show, said in the *Variety* article. (The attorney general’s office offered no comment on that story or this one.)

At the same time, employees exchanged complaints about how Lack had handled reporting by Ronan Farrow, an investigative journalist, on Harvey Weinstein’s sexual crimes. In 2017, Lack and his deputies killed the story. Farrow went on to publish it in *The New Yorker* and to receive a Pulitzer Prize; last year, he released *Catch and Kill*, a book detailing his experience getting his work out. “The way that Lack and other top executives at NBC presided over our reporting on Harvey Weinstein was an absolute disgrace,” Rich McHugh, Farrow’s former producer at NBC, told me. “They were not acting as journalists or treating this as journalism. They were behaving more like an extension of Weinstein’s PR team.”

For months, it seemed as though Lack—the “news is the star” advocate—would survive the embarrassment of losing such a scoop. But then he started facing scrutiny from new sources. Burke, the chairman of NBCUniversal, was preparing to retire. His replacement, Jeff Shell, used to be the head of the Broadcasting Board of Governors—and he’s the man who recruited Lack to the job Lack quickly ditched to join NBC in 2015. By all accounts, Shell had been furious about and felt betrayed by Lack’s abrupt departure. Early this year, Shell, who most recently was overseeing NBCUniversal’s film and entertainment division, became the company’s CEO, and embarked on a staff-wide listening tour. Employees in the news division vented about Lack’s ruling on the Weinstein story and

attitude toward the women in the workplace; they also took the time to air strategic concerns with his oversight of MSNBC.

“You cannot, I think, with a straight face, argue that the vision Andy Lack outlined in 2015—that it’s all going to be straight news during the day—has come to pass,” an MSNBC veteran, who declined to be identified for fear of retaliation, told me. “What’s working is leaning into the coverage of the Trump administration and the progressive versus conservative political divide in the country. And that’s what they’re doing.” MSNBC’s schedule has plenty of straight reporting, on shows helmed by Stephanie Ruhle (9am), Hallie Jackson (10am), Craig Melvin (11am), Andrea Mitchell (12pm), Ali Velshi and Ruhle (1pm), Tur (2pm), Wallace (4pm), and Todd (5pm). But several of those hosts have taken open swipes at Trump. Lack’s biggest success, Wallace, among the last remaining Republicans at MSNBC, has thrived in part because of her willingness to attack the president. Last year she was number one in cable news for total viewers in her time slot—the heart of the news day—for the first time in MSNBC history. She labeled Trump’s defenders in the media “chickenshit” and, more recently, declared that the prospect of his reelection was so awful, she would rather vote for “an automobile.”

In the nineties, a key to Lack’s vision, in addition to breaking news, had been building a network for “the next generation.” Today, however, MSNBC’s viewers skew old; the focus on ratings, to this point, has meant missing out on the young people driving interest in socialism. One of the progressives Lack sent away upon his return was Krystal Ball, who hosted a daytime program. Ball has since emerged as a leading voice of the young left; she now has a show on *The Hill*’s website with a young Trump-conservative. Hayes, who may be the network’s most outspoken progressive, has courted a younger crowd, though many of those fans, it seems, would rather follow him on Twitter or listen to his podcast than tune in to his television program.

Going forward, MSNBC will have to find ways to lure younger audiences. But that job will not be Lack’s. In early May, a day before *Variety* published its report on the attorney general’s investigation, Shell announced a corporate restructuring: Lack was out; Cesar Conde,

who was the chairman of Telemundo, would oversee NBC News, MSNBC, and CNBC, as chairman of the NBCUniversal News Group. To many at MSNBC, the timing of the change-over was a surprise. “This is the right structure to lead NBCUniversal into the future during this transformational time in the industry,” Shell said in a press statement. The send-off to Lack, at the bottom of the release, consisted of a line saying that he’d decided to step down.

With Lack gone and Conde taking over, the old guard, it appears, has lost a pivotal battle. Lack’s deputy, Noah Oppenheim, the president of NBC News, who had been considered Lack’s likely successor, was vaulted over. The outlook could be similarly grim for Griffin. In *Catch and Kill*, Farrow singled out Oppenheim and Griffin as the two Lack associates most involved in suppressing his reporting; all three, Farrow writes, were in direct communication with Weinstein and his attorneys. “I think this puts them all in a perilous position,” McHugh told me, referring to Lack’s departure. “Noah was supposed to be the heir apparent. A lot of people feel both he and Phil have to go in light of the body of reporting that has raised serious questions about their views towards women. Getting Lack out the door is a half step. But it needs to be completed.”

McHugh, who no longer works at NBC, had another observation: “It’s interesting that in this grand reorganization, given what NBC has just been through over the past four years—with both the Lauer and Weinstein disgraces—that they couldn’t come up with at least one qualified female executive to help lead their charge forward.” (NBC declined to make Oppenheim, Griffin, Conde, or Shell available for interviews.)

Conde, a polished and well-liked forty-six-year-old graduate of Harvard and Wharton, joined NBCUniversal in 2013. Before that, he’d been an aide to Colin Powell, the secretary of state in the Bush White House, and spent ten years at Univision, rising to become the network’s president. He left for NBC the same year Comcast acquired its majority stake, serving as the executive vice president in charge of international and digital enterprises; in that position, he reported directly to Burke. In 2015, he was named the chairman of the NBCUniversal

International Group and NBCUniversal Telemundo Enterprises. Under Conde's leadership, Telemundo overtook Univision in the ratings during weekday prime time among viewers between eighteen and forty-nine—a coveted demographic. Conde has aggressively pursued young Latinx audiences, developing original series like *El Señor de los Cielos*, based on the life of a Mexican drug lord, and *Sin Senos Sí Hay Paraíso*, which follows a young girl as she fights to get away from a crime-ridden environment. He's also expanded Telemundo's news coverage, pushing his team to focus on immigration, the Mexican border, and Puerto Rico.

Few among the MSNBC rank and file know much else about Conde, except that he's not Lack. For many people, that's reason enough for optimism. "Somebody coming from Telemundo is a little bit outside NBC News—I feel hopeful about that," Jessica Kerry, a former segment producer for Hayes, said. "The new leadership could certainly change the coverage of the election, and could make the tough choices about how you cover people in power who lie." Perhaps employees from across the ideological spectrum would now be at liberty to speak their minds, even when they're at odds with the establishment.

Then again, it's hard for staffers to know what will happen—or to expect meaningful change. Networks are like sharks, after all; they move toward the money. The economic crisis caused by the pandemic has already led to pay cuts and furloughs at NBCUniversal. It feels too early for the progressives at MSNBC to celebrate. "It would take more outside-the-box thinking to change it," Kerry said. "It will take some tough decisions to change the way the campaign is covered—and that will have to come from somebody in leadership."

Whether MSNBC takes this moment as an opportunity to unburden itself of its worst qualities is yet to be seen. Much depends on to what degree Conde—whose portfolio is significantly larger than Lack's was—decides to tinker with MSNBC's identity. As time passes, producers will no longer be able to count on this generation's older viewers to keep watching. And it's not hard to guess what will happen. Inevitably, the ratings will reflect how things have changed. The executives will fret. Once again, MSNBC will reinvent itself. **CJR**



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Brianne Pfannenstiel

Des Moines Register

Within the *Des Moines Register* we have a dedicated politics team. Now two-thirds of those reporters are spending their full amount of time covering the coronavirus and its effects throughout the state.

We found that there is a ton of appetite for coronavirus updates. The other stories that people are reading are escapist news or things that can take their minds off of all of the terrible things that are happening. And that's not necessarily politics. We've found a slow ramp-up for politics coverage. So we've spent a lot more time thinking about what our mission is. Obviously, it's to inform our readers about who they're voting for. How do we make sure we're serving that mission without spinning our wheels writing campaign features that nobody is reading right now?

How election reporters see us, and how we view them

IOWA POSTCARD

Staring Contest

AUTHOR

Lyz Lenz

ILLUSTRATOR

Melinda Beck

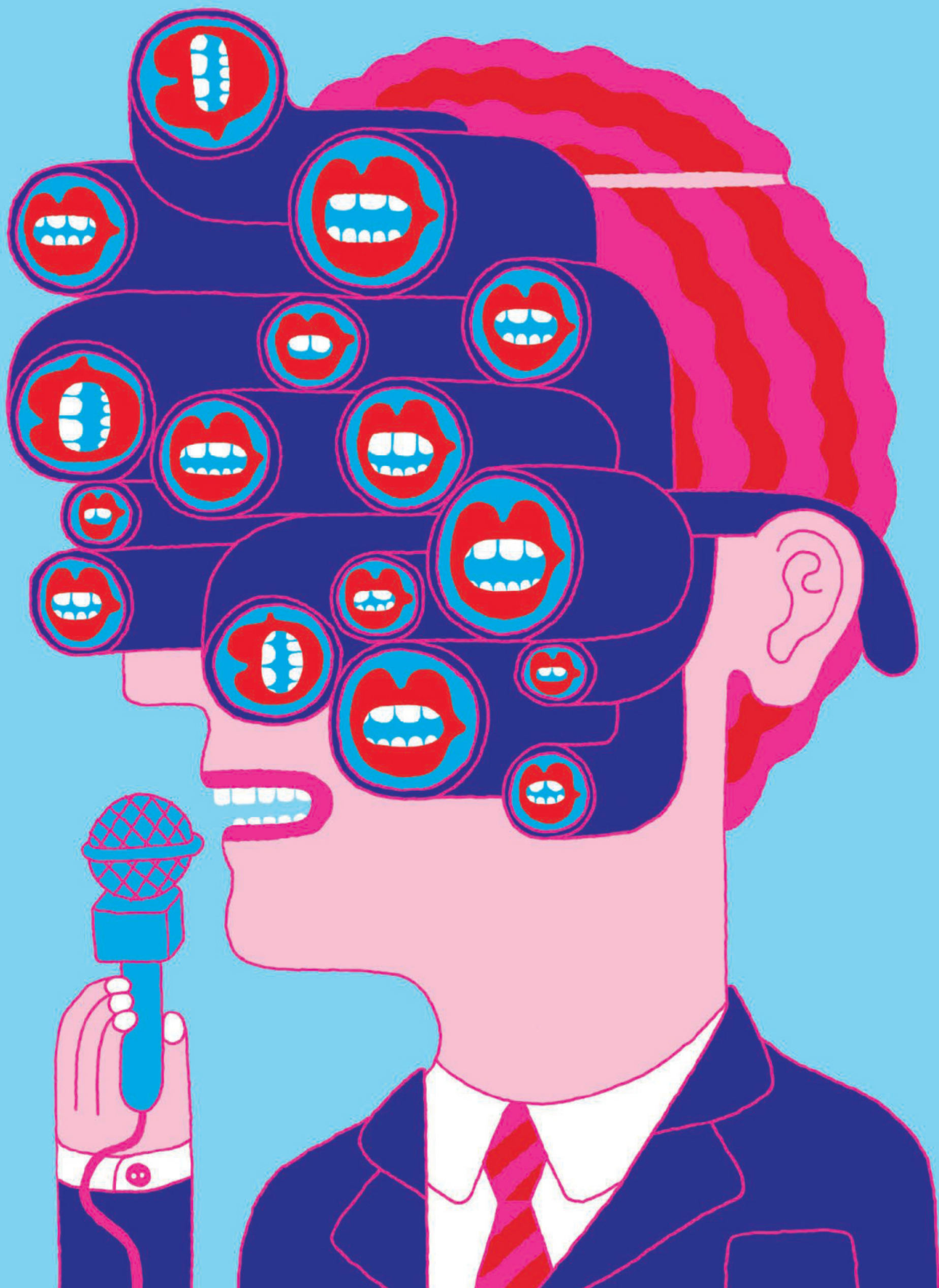
T

o be at the center of a media frenzy is to be sucked into a vortex. Eventually, you get spit out. But even if you're able to get back where you came from, nothing is ever the same, because it's been

documented in stories broadcasting a bizarre version of the truth you thought you knew. Right now the obsession of the press is the uprising against white supremacy in the United States and elsewhere. Before that, it was the coronavirus. But just weeks before the pandemic arrived in our midst—while it was spreading through China and Europe—the central story in American news outlets was Iowa, and its first-in-the-nation caucuses.

Iowa attracts attention on a regular schedule: every four years, for a quadrennial media corn hump. Those of us who live here anticipate the press hordes and the TV news vans. At some point, it feels like every one of us has been on CNN. We are used to being background players in a story who sometimes get cast in outsize roles. We are used to having the camera turned on us, and then away. If you want to understand how that feels, you need to know about Ranch Girl.

Ranch Girl's real name is Hanna Kinney, a recent graduate of the University of Iowa. Like so many of us in Iowa, Kinney loves ranch dip. Ranch—made with buttermilk, onions, garlic, and dill—is a pedestrian condiment, whose appeal is that it is a neutralizing force, a cool contrast with salty and spicy foods. It's nice to have around, even if it doesn't offer much in the way of flavor. People here who love ranch



know that the Airliner, a tin-ceilinged college bar in Iowa City, has some great house-made ranch. Kinney used to go there to meet for Bible study. On February 19, 2019, she was upstairs, sitting in a vinyl booth, ready to eat some pizza. To her great disappointment, it was served without a side of ranch.

So Kinney walked downstairs and pushed her way through throngs of people to get some ranch for herself. She figured it was a political crowd. It was Iowa, February 2019, and Democratic politicians were running for president. Marianne Williamson, Elizabeth Warren, Tulsi Gabbard, Cory Booker, Kirsten Gillibrand, and Bernie Sanders were all making the rounds. Kinney had almost reached the ranch when a woman, surrounded by Airliner patrons, patted her on the shoulder. Kinney, determined, pressed on. "Sorry, I'm just trying to get some ranch," she said.

"That's so Iowa," a voice replied. Everyone laughed.

Kinney wasn't trying to be funny. She'd been trying to weave her way through without interrupting anyone, but the bar is small, and there had been no way of avoiding this group. Being from Iowa, where we apologize when we open doors for people, Kinney said she was sorry. It was a fleeting moment, completely normal and forgettable. But as it turned out, the woman who'd patted Kinney's shoulder was Gillibrand. The exchange was filmed and shared on Twitter by a CNN reporter. Soon, Kinney went viral.

She was in the *Washington Post*, *New York* magazine's *Intelligencer*, and other outlets. She was mentioned on Jimmy Fallon's show. Jim Gaffigan tweeted that he loved her. Meghan McCain tweeted that Ranch Girl was a folk hero. Raygun, a local company, made T-shirts with I'M JUST TRYING TO GET SOME RANCH printed on them. Litehouse Foods sent her a minifridge stocked with ranch. Wish-Bone sent her dozens of bottles. For National Ranch Day, Hidden Valley flew her to Las Vegas.

Linh Ta, a reporter for the *Iowa Capital Dispatch*, was in the Airliner when the Kinney-Gillibrand run-in happened. It's her favorite incident from the primary cycle. And she understands why it lit up the internet. "It's so perfectly Iowa," she told me. "It is us: the apology, the ranch." To the media, Ranch Girl was a symbol, a "typical" Iowan caught in the middle

of a political swarm. Zack Kucharski, the executive editor of the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* (where I'm a columnist), brings up Ranch Girl when I ask him what it's like to be a journalist in a state that is, every four years, obsessed over and then kicked away by the national press. "It's like that," he told me. "These little moments you'd never think anything of, that are so normal, so commonplace, are suddenly weird and scrutinized, celebrated but also mocked."

Kinney took everything in stride. It was funny, after all. But as soon as she was captured by the media and put on Twitter, Kinney was made an exaggeration. Republicans held her up as an example of everyday folks irritated at Democrats. (She wasn't. She's politically active and left-leaning.) Worse, she saw herself everywhere signifying all that's wrong with the Iowa caucuses, including retail politics and questionable food choices. "You know, what bothered me more is when people said, 'In Iowa we only care about our ranch, not these politics. Get out of our state,'" Kinney told me recently. "And I was like, 'No, please do your civic duty. Please vote. Please be aware.' It's just like all these weird interpretations of a moment that is literally five seconds long—and I had no agenda. I literally was there just to get my ranch, and then all of a sudden the internet is like, 'How much can we dissect this video? What can we take away from it?'"

Ranch Girl can't possibly represent the totality of Iowa. But that's what political reporters come and seek—a fragment that can stand in for the whole. Kinney provided easy shorthand for campaign coverage, like many Iowans before her. The net result, over the years, has been a parade of stereotypes.

People here in Iowa don't like that. And now, in these quiet quarantine days, when electoral politics have retreated indoors, the memories ring in our heads. The trouble is not just that we've been used as characters in some campaign story. What worries us more, now that coverage has moved on, is what happens if the country thinks of us as less than fully human.

Iowa's caucuses became first in the primary season by accident. Before 1968, they were held in the middle of the nominating cycle. But things changed with that year's Democratic convention, in late August, at the International Amphitheatre, in Chicago. The

What worries us is what happens when journalists describe people in Iowa as less than fully human.

convention was supposed to showcase the city, but instead it displayed Mayor Richard Daley's brutal use of force against activists. As delegates arrived in town, so did protesters, who had come to rally against the war in Vietnam. Over the course of the event, demonstrators set up an encampment; ten thousand people gathered in Grant Park. The convention hall was surrounded by a steel fence topped with barbed wire and manned by armed officers. Members of the National Guard were sent in and ordered to shoot to kill; police wielded Mace and tear gas. The city erupted in riots.

At one point, Dan Rather, trying to interview a delegate from Georgia, got shoved by a security officer. Walter Cronkite caught the episode on camera. When Rather broke free, he said to Cronkite, "We tried to talk to the man and we got violently pushed out of the way. This is the kind of thing that has been going on outside the hall; this is the first time we've had it happen inside the hall." He paused for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry to be out of breath, but somebody belted me in the stomach."

"We got a bunch of thugs here, Dan," Cronkite replied. The chaos of American politics was on display, on live television, in all its awfulness. Viewers couldn't look away. Seeking civility and order, the electorate turned to a conservative; the winner of the presidential race that November was Richard Nixon.

Afterward, Democrats had to regroup. Reforms, rolled out in 1972, aimed to clean up corruption in the party system, in part by mandating that states shift their primaries earlier. Iowa moved itself to the front of the line. Essentially, the reforms required that there be four layers to the caucus process, with meetings at the precinct, county, state, and national levels. Each of these meetings needed a revised set of documents. The Iowa Democratic Party had only a single old mimeograph machine to make copies. So Iowa's Democrats figured, with a national convention in July, they'd have to give themselves plenty of time.

When the change was made, no one cared that Iowa was first in the nation. It was Iowa, after all. But the media would generate its own obsession. In 1972, George McGovern, a little-known liberal senator from South Dakota, was widely believed to be a long shot against Ed Muskie, a prominent senator from Maine. McGovern walked the state, sometimes campaigning alone. On caucus night the party didn't plan to release the outcome, so R.W. Apple, a reporter for the *New York Times*, got in touch with Richard Bender, an Iowa Democratic official, who set up a phone tree with precinct captains. Bender calculated votes by hand and shared the outcome with Apple. The resulting



COVERING THE CAMPAIGNS

Dave Weigel

Washington Post

The story itself is different now. It's the difference between covering a football game and covering a foosball match. One of them involves a lot of players and location and action, and one of them is necessarily bound to person-to-person outreach that does not go outside.

Have you seen *The Simpsons*? It's like when Homer is chasing the pig, and it keeps going, getting banged up. He's like, "It's still good! Still good! It's a little muddy! It's a little greasy!" It felt like we were still trying to cover a normal campaign. "Well, it's just one event cancellation! Still good! Well, maybe the convention doesn't happen! Still good!" I'm taking myself out of that mindset. I'm going to cover the reality of what is happening, instead of "How do we get back to a normal world?"

story reported that Muskie had won, but barely. McGovern had a real chance, the article observed. Overnight, the national narrative changed.

Apple, sometimes called Johnny Apple, has been described by his own newspaper as having "Churchillian brio and Falstaffian appetites." He was an unusual guy, one who took the time to learn the intricacies of the caucus process. He talked to people in towns all over the state and wrote about their opinions. No one had bothered to listen to Iowans before. And because Apple listened, in 1976 he was the first to report that Jimmy Carter—the former governor of Georgia, a man barely known outside that state—was a contender for the presidency.

In an interview on C-SPAN, Carter recalled how Apple made Iowa *Iowa*. "It was not until Johnny Apple, *New York Times*, went out in the countryside in Iowa and talked to people—you know, teachers and policemen and I guess bartenders and others. And he sized up what we already knew about Iowa and wrote a headline in the *New York Times*...that I might come in first." Other reporters, Carter said, "were lookin' at me as comin' in fifth or sixth, because they very seldom got out of Des Moines."

After that, Republicans got in on the game. In 1980, George H.W. Bush came and made his name here, winning the caucuses. He didn't go on to seize the nomination, but he became vice president. The lore of Iowa—that you could show up as an unknown politician and get a shot at the presidency—became a political mandate.

A similar lesson applied to journalism. Because Apple had revealed the promise of Carter by showing readers how Iowans saw him, other reporters began to believe that if they, too, went to Iowa, and if they talked to farmers or policemen or bartenders, they could reveal something new about American politics that no one else had observed. So they came and they come, every four years, to fuss over our caucus and our bales of straw.

It's brutal. Ty Rushing, the managing editor of the *N'West Iowa Review*, in Sheldon, told me how weird it is to be at the center of the storm as candidates and national media blow in and out of your city.

So many stories get facts and feelings wrong. “It’s frustrating when you live here and work here and love it here and you see *Axios* file an article about rural Iowa with the location line from Cedar Rapids,” he said. For starters, Cedar Rapids is not rural; it’s the state’s second-largest city. And then there are the misplaced cultural assumptions: Rushing brought up the example of a tweet from an editor at *Politico* who complained that Iowa’s coffee shops have no almond milk. We laughed about that. Did she ask? It’s usually right behind the counter.

Rushing works with a staff of a dozen writers and editors to produce four weekly community newspapers and a few niche magazines; they also publish stories online. Across the country, newsrooms like his have been gutted in recent years, working above capacity for low pay, and the situation will only worsen as the economic impact of the coronavirus is felt in its full effect. The staff of the *N’West Iowa Review* doesn’t have the ability or budget to jump every time a candidate says so. Especially if they’re informed at the last minute—and they always are. Many campaigns travel with embedded reporters from national outlets; front-runners rarely seem to care about local media. To Rushing, it can feel like candidates think of his city as a quaint backdrop to a *Washington Post* story, and little more.

Rushing is weary of reading the same names quoted by the national press over and over. Often, it’s Bob and Sue Dvorsky, an influential and politically active couple; Sue once served as the Iowa Democratic chair. A quick Google search pulls up no fewer than ten articles in which they’ve been quoted in the past year, from Bloomberg News, *The New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, and the *San Francisco Herald*. It’s exhausting, too, to see how superficially Iowa is described. A 2011 article in *The Atlantic* by a professor named Stephen G. Bloom is a classic of the shit-on-Iowa genre. He calls Iowa—where he lives and teaches at the state university—“a schizophrenic, economically-depressed,” and “culturally-challenged” place full of Jesus-loving, gun-toting white people who take their dates to tractor pulls. (It’s been almost a decade and people here still haven’t forgiven him.) Writing on Iowa for

Elle, Cintra Wilson describes “surly women around 30 who had been savaged by love and taken to expressing their rage through softball and tattoos.” Even nice depictions get us wrong. The *Washington Post*’s Max Boot, in his cloying description of the Iowa State Fair, writes that “Iowa nice” has “survived in an age of snark, sarcasm, and mass shootings.” Except that “Iowa nice” is really just repressed midwestern rage, the kind best demonstrated by Amy Klobuchar toward Pete Buttigieg in the Democratic debates, with her withering stares and icy-bland statements that to the rest of the country mean nothing, but to us, in Iowa, connote the heartiest of *fuck-yous*.

Plenty of other places receive similar treatment, when it’s their turn for a primary or fifteen minutes of random news attention from parachuting reporters. The result is caricature. Mississippi: swamp people. West Virginia: bitter backwards coal miners. Wuhan: wild meat markets. Joseph Jaafari, a reporter and documentary filmmaker, teaches a journalism class at the City University of New York and has observed that some of his students distrust the press because of how their neighborhoods have been covered. “They’re first-generation Black and Latino,” Jaafari told me. “They were really kind of disenchanted by the fact that all these outlets kept writing about the hatchet-wielding guy or the shootings and stabbings on Parsons Boulevard.” It’s disappointing, he said. “The entire edict of journalism is that we are voicing the voiceless.”

Covering a place well is hard. And, as Rushing told me, the stories about Iowa aren’t entirely wrong. “We *are* farmers in diners,” he said. “We do have people who voted for that racist Steve King”—the Republican congressman who recently wondered aloud when the term *white supremacist* became so offensive—“but it’s not *all* we are.” In June, during a primary, Iowans voted King out of Congress. We are mostly white—at 90 percent of the population—but not everyone is. Iowans are joining in the anti-racist protests that have risen up around the world. Iowans own guns and went for Donald Trump in 2016, but not all of us are like the Dorr brothers—Chris, Ben,

Look beyond easy-access sources, those who are in power, and talk to people at the margins.

Aaron, and Matthew—who created Facebook groups to protest coronavirus-related restrictions. My friends and neighbors have been making masks. Our medical professionals have been treating patients. And even after our governor, Kim Reynolds, a Republican, pushed to reopen businesses in the state, many have remained hesitant to rejoin regular life.

Now that the political press is stuck at home, for the most part, covering the campaigns from quarantine, the people of Iowa are even more distant from the consciousness of national media. Yet at the same time, we are a hotbed of infection. As of this writing, COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has killed about five hundred sixty people in Iowa and infected over twenty thousand. There are stories about this in the national press, but mostly they're examples of unmasked people in crowded bars or the rates of infection at food processing plants. These articles rarely include the voices of people who work in the plants, many of whom

are undocumented immigrants. And when Reynolds announced that she would outsource coronavirus testing to a tech startup in Utah—one with no healthcare experience—the arrangement received little interest from major news organizations, even though it merited caucus-level scrutiny.

I often wonder if the limits of our reporting define the limits of our empathy. Obsessing over stereotypes, instead of real people, has consequences. A story about Iowa will go viral if it shows white farmers gathering to drink Busch Light in the midst of a pandemic. But what about the essential workers who are showing up to Iowa's assembly lines despite the risks of a deadly disease and deportation? Those characters get written out of the story, to everyone's detriment. If the coronavirus teaches journalists a lesson—one that would apply to the caucuses, too—it ought to be about humility and nuance. It's critical that we look beyond the easy-access sources, those who are in power, and talk to people at the margins, those who

don't fit so easily into the established narrative. Journalists come, obsess, and leave—okay, that's fine. The least they owe their subjects is complexity on the page.

The night of the 2020 caucuses, Tim Carty, a resident of Iowa City, sent the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* a column: “An Open Letter from an Iowan Who Only Had One Job.” The piece, which was quickly published, addressed reports of delays and inconsistencies in the voting results. Carty was seething. “Once the caucus is over, we're out of the headlines,” he wrote. “Gone. Out of sight. Out of mind. Once every four years the world shines a harsh spotlight on Iowa, expecting immediate perfection and pointing out all the ways we don't measure up. You mock us for our flaws, our lack of diversity, our folksy kindness and humility. Then you demand flawlessness. That's. Not. Fair.” That month, Carty's column was one of the most read stories on the *Gazette* website. People in Iowa were grateful; their exasperation had been expressed.

Carty's outrage reminded me of something I'd experienced a month earlier, at the condo of a former lawmaker who was hosting an event for undecided caucus-goers. Rep. Katie Porter was there, a surrogate for Warren, so the gathering drew some press. The home was in a new neighborhood in town, one that had been rebuilt since historic floods hit our area in 2008. The walls were painted shades of green—mint and forest—and the chairs were comfy worn leather. A pair of gentle, aging golden retrievers roamed around. Guests congregated at a huge table with a cheese tray from the local grocery chain. They were friends and neighbors, people I knew not from reporting, but just from living in town for fifteen years. It was easy to spot the reporters, hovering awkwardly.

I saw one from a national outlet sprawl across two chairs while a pair of women, invited guests in their late seventies, stood. I almost went up to the guy to tell him to move. But a friend of mine, someone who goes to my church, recognized my agitation and stopped me with a pat on the arm. “He's just a reporter boy,” she said. “Let him be.”

Later that evening, after Porter had given a speech and as everyone was politely eating

cheese, the same reporter approached a local city council member and asked her why she was undecided. My friend from church took him aside and kindly pointed to others in the room, people who were not politically affiliated. “You want to talk to a normal person, talk to her or him,” she said, gesturing to neighbors in opposite corners. He didn't do it. I know because I read the story he filed afterward, and laughed at his description of a man he interviewed, someone very active in the Democratic Party, as “an undecided Iowan.”

It might not be fair to scrutinize a writer I met only once on the campaign trail. Maybe by focusing on him I'm taking something small and making it more than the sum total of a person. But is turnabout fair play? At least I didn't call him surly. And it seems to me that he signifies something about the quadrennial obsession with Iowa, about the missed opportunities of parachute reporting, and about the humiliation caused by stereotyping a state over and over, for as long as American democracy stands.

It's not enough to perch at a distance and report on the weird goings-on of people seen from afar. Members of the press don't merely observe, of course; the stories we tell affect people's lives. To ignore that would seem to miss the point of journalism. The campaign writer who sprawled out on the chairs might leave Iowa and not come back until the caucuses start up again, but the women standing next to him will remain here—and live in the residue of the media's depictions. At this moment, because they're old enough to be considered at high risk for the coronavirus, they're feeling especially vulnerable. The other day, I contacted them to ask if they were okay. They were, they both said, but they're scared.

The stories of these women—and Ranch Girl, and the meat-processing-plant workers—continue on after the political press goes home. Whether they live or die, keep their jobs or struggle to pay rent—these are the political concerns they're left to contend with outside the quadrennial spectacle that draws major outlets. Maybe that reporter from the event is writing more nuanced stories now—I can only hope. We have about four years until the next follow-up. **CJR**



OUT THERE

An online conspiracy finds its way into the physical world.



Chaos Theory

Amanda Darrach talks to a political scientist about how nihilism affects the media landscape.

Michael Bang Petersen, Mathias Osmundsen, and Kevin Arceneaux, a team of political scientists, don't concern themselves with what people believe. Belief is a private act, they say. People tend to believe information not because it's factual, not because it's based on expert opinion, but because it aligns with their existing worldview. What interests these scientists is the moment when belief turns to public action—when people click “share.”

In the 2016 election cycle, Arceneaux, Osmundsen, and Petersen observed a proliferation of hostile political rumors—an umbrella term encompassing conspiracy theories, misinformation, and malicious amplification of scandals. Many of the rumors circulating online had a political target—Obama is a Muslim, or the Democrats secretly operate a pedophilia ring—but they contained a larger accusation as well, one that went beyond politics and seemed to call the entire political class and social order into question. The stories seemed to be saying: *The system is rigged.*

In other words, the motivation for much of the misinformation and rumormongering online wasn't only partisan or strategic in nature. Something else was going on. The scientists concluded that a primary driver was the desire to inflict chaos.

After disinformation was shown to have had effects on the outcome of the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, Arceneaux, Osmundsen, and Petersen decided to create a system to measure the desire to create chaos. Last summer, their resulting work, “A ‘Need for Chaos’ and the Sharing of Hostile Political Rumors in Advanced Democracies,” received the award for best political psychology paper from the American Political Science Association.

In the paper, which is currently making its way through the review process for publication, the scientists identify a personality trait they call Need for Chaos. To measure it they conducted surveys with 5,157 participants in the United States and 1,336 in Denmark. (Petersen and Osmundsen are professors at Aarhus University in Denmark; Arceneaux is a professor at Temple University in the United States.) One survey question asked:

“I need chaos around me—it is too boring if nothing is going on.” Agree or disagree?

Another:

“I get a kick when natural disasters strike in foreign countries.” Agree or disagree?

And:

“When I think about our political and social institutions, I cannot help thinking ‘just let them all burn.’” Agree or disagree?

In response to this last question, 40 percent of respondents did not disagree. The percentage who agreed with other nihilistic statements was also high. Arceneaux, Osmundsen, and Petersen were shocked.

Their work seeks to understand why this nihilism is so widespread. Their paper gives credit to pop culture for picking up on an ambient craving for chaos before political scientists got there. They quote the character Alfred in the 2008 movie *The Dark Knight*, speaking about the Joker: “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

Likewise, in *Fight Club*, released in 1999, Tyler Durden rails against consumerist culture: “We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, no Great Depression. Our Great War’s a spiritual war—our Great Depression is our

lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars. But we won’t. And we’re slowly learning that fact. And we’re very, very pissed off.”

In June 2017, Richard Spencer rehashed similar rhetoric at a rally for Identity Evropa, a neo-Nazi white-supremacist group:

As the Cold War ended, liberalism and Americanism lost its enemy. It lost its boogeyman. And it began to feel that history was over.... You have no future. You’re an individual, bouncing around on the internet between various consumer choices, social lifestyles, and sexual orientations.... We aren’t fighting for freedom. We aren’t fighting for the Constitution.... We are fundamentally fighting for meaning in our lives.... We are fighting to be powerful again in a sea of weakness and hopelessness. That is our battle.

In their paper, Arceneaux, Osmundsen, and Petersen don’t draw a necessary connection between Need for Chaos behavior and white supremacy or violence. The survey results are based on the “thoughts and behaviors that people are motivated to entertain when they sit alone (and, perhaps, lonely) in front of the computer,” they write. But the scientists do associate the urge to share hostile political rumors with “stronger animosity against the target group.”

Seven weeks after Spencer’s “end of history” speech, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, exploded in violence. This spring, online disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic gained traction amid the lack of a unified government response, and rumors formed about violent and disruptive instigators in the turmoil of protests sparked by the death of George Floyd. Now the country approaches a divisive presidential election, and the potential for those who crave chaos to wreak havoc is greater than ever. I spoke with Kevin Arceneaux about where the Need for Chaos comes from, how the pandemic is influencing disinformation online, and how journalists can best cover chaos agents in the lead-up to the presidential election. This interview has been condensed from multiple conversations and edited for clarity.

As the country approaches a divisive presidential election, those who crave chaos may wreak more havoc than ever.

DARRACH What do you know about these agents of chaos?

ARCENEUX We know that they tend to be younger, a bit more male, a bit better off socioeconomically, like middle class or upper middle class. The racial demographics are overwhelmingly white. So they occupy what people on the outside would see as a privileged place in society, but they don't feel privileged. In fact they feel abandoned by society, like they've lost out.

People high on Need for Chaos don't have one state. There are lots of ways by which people get there. The one thing they have in common is they want respect and they feel like they don't have it. They feel marginalized. Even if an outsider might think, "Hey, wait a second, you live in a nice house. You have all these privileges. Why don't you feel respected?" they will tell you, "I don't."

DARRACH Why do they feel marginalized?

ARCENEUX Maybe in part because social progress has involved recognizing minorities and women, these folks feel like they're losing the respect that they deserve. The trigger is a feeling of "The way the world was before, it would have been my oyster, and now that's slipping away from me."

On a psychological level, people who tested high on Need for Chaos also tend to be higher on certain other measures. For instance, one

“Some use conspiracy theories as a tool to hammer away at the foundations of a system that they think needs to fall. They don’t care if it’s true or not.”

is Social Dominance Orientation, which is a fancy way of saying somebody who has a worldview that divides the world into “strong” and “weak” groups and who wants their group to be the dominant one.

These folks like inequality. They like hierarchies. They look out into the world and they say, “My group should be at the top—why isn’t it? Why do I perceive it slipping?”

Another track we see is people high in valuing reputation and status, but who perceive that they’re low status. So perhaps there’s a socially awkward loner kid. He is in some sense marginalized, but by his peer group, not by society.

DARRACH I read you Spencer’s “end of history” speech. He wasn’t selling his cause as a political fight, but rather as a fight to reclaim meaning in life. Does that strategy seem to be directed toward a similar demographic?

ARCENEUX We see that people who score higher in Need for Chaos are more likely to

share hostile rumors or to behave in nihilistic ways. That’s true even if we account for personality disorders. It’s not explained away by saying they’re all sociopaths or weirdos.

Just because you win the Cold War and you’re well off doesn’t mean you’re happy. They’re the kind of folks who are bouncing around on the internet, searching for their identity and feeling excluded. So that discourse keys into exactly the kind of animus that these people are feeling.

DARRACH You included a question on boredom in your survey. Do you tie that back to the feeling that a meaningful connection to the world is absent?

ARCENEUX It’s interesting—it doesn’t seem like this is some sort of groundswell that’s coming from actual deprivation, or being on the outskirts of society, or being marginalized in an economic or racial sense. If you have to work two, three jobs to put food on your table, you don’t have time to be bored.

One thing I learned from having to move all my instruction online really quickly is that a number of my students didn't have reliable access to the internet once they left campus. So even the ability to sit around in your underwear and forward hostile political rumors is also kind of a luxury.

DARRACH And instigating chaos will break up the boredom? Give life meaning?

ARCENEUX These people seem to have a special sense about chaos having a potential to play a positive, strategic role. Other people would say chaos is a bad thing. These people have a tendency to say, "No, chaos can be useful to me."

It's not that they want there to be chaos all the time. Bullies, for example, use different tactics to get people to do what they want. Need for Chaos is a character adaptation. It falls in the middle ground between a personality trait, which is super stable, and a state people have that changes from context to context. People have a disposition that's triggered by a context. So for people who really care about their reputation, really care about dominance, if you put them in a place where they feel marginalized, this turns on for them.

In a very minor way, what we did was to create the feeling of marginalization in an experimental setup. Psychologists have done this. We had people play a game of catch on a computer screen. At some point, the people they're playing catch with exclude them. We found it moved people up a little bit on the scale of Need for Chaos. Exclusion makes you feel bad, and maybe you want to get back at people. But among the people who were high on the scale of Need for Chaos, when you put them in the marginalized position, they really act out.

DARRACH Is this trait a unique product of the moment we are living in? How much does political and social context play in?

ARCENEUX It exists in all times. Think about Holden Caulfield. There are people who are predisposed to say, "I want to throw the Man off," whoever the Man is. "And the way I do that is screw up everything."

Look at what's happened over the past century or so: as inequality increases, you see an increase in discontent, and that discontent isn't just among people who find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Fight Club is this interesting story at the end of the 1990s, which now we can sort of look back on almost as a reincarnation of the 1950s—good times were here again, the economy was roaring, the Cold War had ended. But there was also all this dark stuff going on underneath, in terms of banks and the beginning of the growth in income inequality becoming apparent. *Fight Club* is about taking on these evil corporate entities that are trying to control us through consumerism. It's a really interesting zeitgeist from that period.

DARRACH We are still sifting through the disinformation that played into the 2016 election. Do you identify any social context from that time that would have triggered Need for Chaos actors?

ARCENEUX I think that it has to do with the continuing increases in income inequality for the middle class. In this time period we're seeing things like Gamergate, the rise of white nationalism. People who are directly making the argument, "We used to be in this dominant position"—"we" being white or male—"and now we perceive that it's slipping. We have to rip the system down and build it back up in a way that puts us back on top." I mean, that's what these people are asking for.

So in some ways these two trends over the past twenty years, of increasing income inequality and also increasing diversity, could be responsible for triggering the same sort of outcome.

DARRACH Does it also stem from the Obama presidency, then?

ARCENEUX I think the data agrees with that, but I should say that the Need for Chaos doesn't mean the individual supports Trump. I should be really clear about that. What we're finding, just in terms of chaos, is it doesn't seem like it's owned by one political group. It's broader than politics; it goes beyond politics.

Among those who care about politics, if the status they worry about is being a white

male, yeah, I think that we can make the argument that those folks are going to be the people that gravitate to Trump.

DARRACH Gravitate to Trump and away from Obama?

ARCENEUX I would say away from Obama as well as away from the other establishment Republican candidates. So Jeb Bush, too.

If you want to talk about specific people and their concerns and their worries about why they're marginalized, I think I can make a case that those particular people would see someone like Trump, or even someone like Sanders, as "Yeah, let's burn it all down." But they're going to be very different people, right? They might both be high on Need for Chaos. But the Trump voter might be different than the Sanders voter.

DARRACH Did the agents of chaos you identified affect the result of 2016?

ARCENEUX If what we found is correct since 2016, then the answer would be yes, in the sense that these would be the folks spreading all sorts of fake stuff on social media. Not just about Hillary Clinton, but also about Trump. Creating noise. These people would be the exact right people for amplifying Russian propaganda. People still debate about how much of an effect that had on the outcome of the 2016 election, but we certainly know that it was an aspect of the 2016 election.

DARRACH And what about the conditions now, in 2020? We are living through a global pandemic, preparing for another election.

ARCENEUX We live in a world that has internet and social media and allows rumors and vile memes to travel at light speed. Now put that in a context with an immense amount of uncertainty, and an immense amount of pain, both economic pain and a disease that's causing death and destruction. I think this might be one of those situational triggers for people that pushes them over the edge and triggers a latent Need for Chaos. I think the pandemic can exacerbate it. You have more people than before feeling marginalized,

sitting at their computer, and seeing this as a way to create chaos.

This is going to be a very weird election. You can imagine rumors about the role that China has to play in this, whether or not this virus was invented to take down Trump, whether or not voting is really secure. I'm pretty sure that state agents of chaos, such as Russia, are going to try to do again what they did in 2016. And, in part because of the pandemic, they might have a larger army of folks willing to pass along that misinformation, which then will be dutifully reported on by the mainstream media...spreading it further.

DARRACH Much of the recent coverage of the Black Lives Matter uprisings against police brutality has depicted them as chaotic rather than largely peaceful. Minnesota governor Tim Walz referred to the protests as "wanton violence" and "wanton destruction." Many conservatives blamed antifa members for the rioting that took place, though that has been disproved. What do you think of claims that people are infiltrating the protests for the purpose of instigating violence?

ARCENEUX I would say that people who are higher in Need for Chaos do support what's been termed violent activism, which includes fighting with the police, looting, these kinds of things. Whether they are actually doing that here, I don't think we can say without data. I would be willing to wager money that people who are high Need for Chaos might have gone out just to create chaos. But, given the broad turnout at these protests, they would be a minor element.

We developed this concept to understand why people share hostile political rumors online, and not why people do other kinds of political activities, such as protests. So a lot more thought has to be put into how Need for Chaos translates into more visible political actions.

DARRACH Do you have any sense of what kind of media chaos agents consume?

ARCENEUX They tend to sample from all over, not just left or right. They tend to traffic extremist websites that essentially peddle... conspiracy theories. Sites I'd never heard of.

The mainstream sites are boring. You're not going to get that crazy story to spread that says that Warren Buffett invented the coronavirus, or the QAnon stuff. Where the hell does that stuff come from? The *New York Times* isn't writing those stories. They come from chat rooms like 4chan and 8chan. Those are the places where those things are born, and then they get a life by people posting them on blogs and then spreading them on social media.

DARRACH What have you seen on social media since this pandemic started that bears the hallmarks of high Need for Chaos?

ARCENEUX Right now it's conspiracy theories about the origins of the coronavirus, about how powerful and secretive elites—including the media, of course—are blowing this out of proportion and it's not as bad as they're saying, blah blah blah. Those are the things that are going to spread like wildfire.

I'm quite sure that our Need for Chaos folks are sharing those, whether or not they believe them, because they can get eyeballs and create chaos. But it fits their worldview, too. These faceless, horrible elites, trying to screw them over—"let's create chaos so that we ruin the plans."

People ask me sometimes why people would believe this crazy stuff when it's obviously ridiculous. Well, some of them believe it. Some people say, "This is b.s. I shouldn't be cooped up in my house, I shouldn't have to wear a face mask." But some of them just use this as a tool to hammer away at the foundations of a system that they think needs to fall. They don't care if it's true or not.

DARRACH We're so polarized right now. You either believe that science is sacrosanct or you believe that this is a plot to dethrone Trump, and there's not much room in the middle. Does that create more space for high Need for Chaos actors to share hostile political rumors that people will actually believe?

ARCENEUX Yes, it does. We know this from our work on ethnic riots. When you're in a polarized political or even social situation, an "us versus them" situation of intense competition, hostile rumors are more likely to gain traction. That's largely because there

are people who just hate the other side, so either they believe that the other side is doing horrible things or they see, "Ah, this is a useful tool. I can mobilize others to fight against people who are evil, whether I believe this or not. Hillary Clinton probably doesn't have a child sex ring up in a pizza parlor. But what if I can get people to believe that?"

Even in a pandemic, where you would hope we'd say, "Okay, let's put all this stuff aside, we're all human beings and Americans, let's face this threat together," there are some people who feel the world is still divided into Team D and Team R. If anything, the pandemic makes it worse.

You have to separate out the people who are high on the Need for Chaos. They're in their own special box. The rest of us, we're trapped up in this us-versus-them warfare. And so we can be sometimes used as dupes by these folks who are high Need for Chaos. They are trying to spread rumors, so sometimes they get people who are partisans to believe and transmit their rumors. The motivation of a partisan is an urge to show the world how bad those crappy Republicans, or Democrats, are. The motivation of someone who is high Need for Chaos is just to spread chaos.

DARRACH How can the media better respond to chaos agents?

ARCENEUX The media focuses on political tactics rather than substance, and that increases political distrust. There is also evidence that when there is a lot of coverage using the term "fake news," it drives down trust in the media. Then misinformation is no longer the story. More dangerous is the circulation of half truths, or stories where there's an element of truth with different, tactical framing—it's powerful in the same way propaganda is powerful. Most importantly, fact checks don't help except among a very small segment of readers. The real problem is people offline, so it is more effective when the media focuses coverage on who's spreading misinformation and what their motives are, rather than framing the rumors they spread seriously. Otherwise, mainstream journalists play into the hands of chaos agents. Instead, invert the script. See it as all coming from the same noise machine, and write about the noise machine. **CJR**

End Note



Casting a primary
vote in Louisville

Some political acts take place in public, others in private. The former—protests, speeches, social media posts—are readily accessible for journalists to cover. The latter can be harder to see, especially when people are sheltering in place. Who, by the light of a bedroom lamp, in quarantine, is shifting her beliefs, as she is confronted by the damning facts of America's white supremacy? How many of those who supported Trump in 2016 perceive that a change must be made? And how many Black people expect, yet again, to be denied the right to vote? Participating in an election is at once a solitary and collective enterprise, a chance for members of a democracy to show who they really are. The outcome has urgent stakes; Black lives hang in the balance. This year, when the ballots are counted (many of them mailed in), the press must lay bare the whole story: of the pandemic, systemic racism, and the continuing ills of politics. —*Betsy Morais*

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